

**“The Cold-Eyed Reproach of the Facts”:
Trauma and Identity in the Novels of Robert Penn Warren**

by

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1. Unclaimed Identity

Concerning Jack Burden, the protagonist of Robert Penn Warren's 1946 novel *All the King's Men*, Arthur Mizener once wrote, "He cannot commit his soul to experience because he cannot face what experience will do to the perfection of the story his reason has made up about his life" (55). This conflict between a reasoned, ordered inner narrative and the disorder of identity as shaped by history, experience, and reality, is found in characters throughout Warren's fictional *oeuvre*. Time and again, his characters are individuals who have developed an idealistic, but flawed, sense of their own identity in relation to, and often in opposition of, society, history, and the mythologies of the American South. Through experience, these characters are forced to modify their ordered sense of identity and accept a less ideal, yet more aware self-hood, bound by an acceptance of Warren's fundamental concept of complicity.

Yet the path to this epiphanic *Dasein* is not easily traveled. Indeed the process by which these characters break from their idealized conceptions of identity is marked by all the hallmarks of trauma. Cathy Caruth coined the term "unclaimed experience," the title phrase of her 1996 monograph, to describe the aspect of latency in Freudian trauma. Unclaimed experience is an experience, usually sudden and violent, for which the victim was unprepared and thus unable to fully comprehend in the moment. These experiences are thus "unclaimed," in that understanding is delayed and takes place not in the initial moment of impact, but rather through numerous traumatic recursions. Identity in the novels of Robert Penn Warren functions according to this same principle. Each of his idealistic characters is faced again and again with painful, indeed traumatic (in the pop-psychological sense of the term), incarnations of his or her identity. Yet each is unprepared to accept these experiences in the moment, and it is only through repeated recursion that he or she is able to come to an epiphanic resignation—an understanding of the

profoundly non-ideal reality of his or her identity. I term this latent construction of an experiential, existential sense of self “unclaimed identity.”

In Caruth’s discussion of Freudian trauma, drawing on the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, she defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth 91). These “repetitive phenomena” are attempts by the individual subconscious to integrate and understand traumatic material that it was not prepared to understand at the time of the event, “the shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known” (62).

In most accounts of trauma, the catastrophic event is a physical encounter with death or violence—an accident, war-time experience, or the death of a loved one—but the ultimate cause of traumatic repression is the act of having survived, the act of leaving (21-22). I propose a different type of trauma—one that is not inspired by a direct encounter with death but by a traumatic existential encounter, which forces the one who leaves that event to reevaluate his or her identity, moral understanding, and conception of reality. Warren’s novels all portray a character, characters, or an entire community (most notably in *The Cave*) dealing with this type of existential trauma. In each case the characters have had previous encounters with the type of event that ultimately sets them off, but it is the suddenness and lack of preparation for a particular catastrophic encounter with the vagaries of morality and identity that they are unable to process. The shock of the event drives each character to retreat from this trauma while

simultaneously being pulled, almost against their will, into an obsessive quest to integrate and understand the encounter.

At this point, a question remains unanswered: Why is the encounter with a false or changing identity so traumatic for these characters? Of course part of it is, as I discuss above, that they were not prepared for the shock of the experience. Yet there seems to be a more profound layer of this traumatic experience, a more fundamental sense of betrayal: a betrayal of one's expected right to understand the nature of reality. This is the nature of unclaimed identity—these characters come face to face with an experience that exposes the inadequacy of their existential understanding and are forced, through endless recursions and years of consideration, to find a way to integrate that traumatic moment with their understanding of the world.

2. Identity and the “Othering” of the American South

Central to the function of unclaimed identity in Warren’s novels, is the hegemonic discourse surrounding the American South—particularly its position as an internal Other for the rest of America to define itself against. David R. Jansson—drawing on Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and later works by Gramsci, Weber, and Louisa Schein—proposes the term “internal orientalism” for this treatment of the Southern states. He writes, “The discourse of internal orientalism informs the construction of territorial identities, creating geographic ideas that fill with meaning the abstract spaces on the map” (Jansson 300). Thus, portrayals of the South, and of Southerners, display a disingenuous homogeneity. If the essence of the American character is modernity, democracy, equality, rationality and hard work, then the South is the seat of the unmodern, disenfranchisement, racism, hotheadedness, sloth and worse. Geographically locating these undesirable traits in the South allows the rest of the country to imagine that they are Southern problems and not American problems; that the eradication of any undesirable traits is simply a matter of modernizing the backward South.

W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* (1941) is a watershed work in the de-romanticizing of the Old South. It is also a work that furthered and facilitated the narrative of Southern exceptionalism. Jansson writes:

[Cash’s] contention that the South is “sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation” is central; in cleaving “the South” from “America,” Cash facilitates the essential self-other distinction that allows the observer to enumerate (and reify) the “systematic differences” (Said, 1979, p. 300) between the regions, a formulation that had long been the foundation for the discourse of internal orientalism. (301-302)

Cash's central purpose in *The Mind of the South* is to decenter the myth of a chivalric Old South. He does this by erecting his own myth of the homogenized mass of Poor-White Southerners, the Irish yeoman farmers who made good to become property holders and slave owners. This monolithic "Irishman," the referent to every use of the term "Southerner," is the embodiment and source of all things distasteful in Southern culture. Cash's homogenization was a reaction against the equal and opposite project taken up by other Southern intellectuals, to embrace Southern Otherness and push back against Northern influence and modernization. James Cobb, in *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, describes this attempted reversal of internal orientalism:

Reacting in a way that held profound implications for their identity as a group, white southerners often insisted that their society was the true embodiment of the American spirit, and proceeded, by steadfastly and often blindly resisting what they saw as northernization for well over a century, to define themselves primarily in opposition to the North. (4-5)

It is worth noting, especially as this project is concerned with the novels of Robert Penn Warren, the Tennessee Agrarians were one such group attempting to "stand" against northern influence.¹

There is, of course, a clear racial bias on both sides of this discourse. The "Southerner" was defined by some as the upright continuation of the Old South, and by Cash as the crooked descendants of the Poor-Whites. As Cobb notes, "This definition of southern identity effectively excluded the South's black residents in much the same way that both black and white southerners had been "othered" out of the construction of American identity" (5). Furthermore:

¹ It is also worth noting that Warren's sophomore contribution to the Agrarian's *I'll Take My Stand*, a problematic pro-segregation essay entitled "The Briar Patch," is a work that Warren spent the rest of his career distancing himself from and writing against, notably in works like *Brother to Dragons* (1953), *Segregation, the Inner Conflict in the South* (1956) and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965).

In succeeding years, even more racially enlightened white observers followed Cash's exclusionary example by identifying southern whites as "southerners" and southern blacks as "blacks." Thus, black southerners were denied their regional identities not only by the antagonistic defenders of a southern racial system that rendered blacks virtually invisible, but even by their would-be liberators who wanted to destroy that system. (Cobb 262)

Thus blacks became a further orientalized Other within the internally orientalized American South. Cash's *The Mind of the South* has been criticized as a work that is fundamentally concerned with Southern race relations, in the form revealed by ugly white prejudice, but nonetheless paints the South with a broad, white brush. We can apply a similar criticism to Robert Penn Warren's novels. Though race is often a powerful theme in his works—and forms part of the core traumatic material that the characters grapple with in novels like *All the King's Men*, *Night Rider*, and *Flood*—the Southern identity that Warren explores is predominately white. His black characters are often marginalized and even in cases where they are given voice, perhaps most notably with Brother Potts and "Jingle Bells," the gas station attendant in *Flood*, (discussed below), they seem to take on a one-dimensional, didactic role. Still, this very Othering and marginalization of black voices forms a part of the trauma that Warren's characters experience. For these characters, the experience of working through unclaimed identity and accepting complicity is a process of coming to terms with an unromantic Southern identity, defined in no small part by hegemonic racism.

The mechanism of internal orientalism led some Americans to define the nation against the internal Other of the South and led some Southerners to define the South against an Othered North. Most importantly, for this project, it left all Southerners to define themselves against a

discourse of orientalism. The impact of colonial attitudes on the colonized was first explored by Said in *Orientalism*, and was later expanded upon by other thinkers, such as Frantz Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon the internalization of colonial attitudes by native intellectuals:

The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course. The native intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas, and deep down in his brain you could always find a vigilant sentinel ready to defend the Greco-Latin pedestal.

(Fanon 46)

This process of internalization is vastly important to a reading of Southern identity in Warren's novels. Much of the trauma and unclaimed identity in these novels begins with an acceptance of the exceptional Southern ugliness described by W.J. Cash and others. These characters often try to run from this acceptance, either by running from the South itself or from that which is Southern within them. This is true of Jack Burden in *All the Kings Men*, Sue Murdock in *At Heaven's Gate*, Monty Harrick in *The Cave*, Bradwell Tolliver in *Flood*, and Jed Tewksbury of *A Place to Come To*, among others. Ultimately, the processing of their unclaimed identity rests on an acceptance of their complicity with that ugliness, and a decision to move beyond it.

3. *All the King's Men* (1946)²

Any discussion of *All the King's Men* needs to begin with the novel's first six paragraphs, and that thematic prologue is best contextualized in terms of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. There is ample evidence to suggest that Coleridge's poem was at the forefront of Warren's mind while he was working on *All the King's Men*. Along with drafting the novel, Warren was also composing his essay on *The Rime*. He would often take breaks from one manuscript to work on the other. The essay, titled "A Poem of Pure Imagination," was originally published as a preface in a 1946 edition of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It deals with Warren's thoughts on the symbolic schema of the poem, and helped Warren to crystalize some of his own preferences for symbolic treatment. In the words of Joseph Blotner, "His comments on Coleridge's work were full of relevance to his own" (218). Coleridge's influence is evident in much of Warren's work, but Gwen Le Cor argues that it is in *All the Kings Men* that we see the clearest influence of the earlier poet (121), and James Justus writes that in the novel, "the Mariner figure dominates both structure and texture" (28). Warren's essay provides a clear taxonomy of symbolism, sin and expiation that resonates through *All the King's Men*.

The novel's musical opening passage repeatedly references the vivid contrast between the white concrete slab highway and the black of the surrounding dirt and center line. This contrast works initially on an aesthetic level. The strong images of color and the freeing surprise of a road which reverses the typical construction, pull the reader into the abstraction of Warren's prose. Furthermore, the contrast between black and white serves a symbolic purpose, with deep connection to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

² I've elected to begin with *All the King's Men* because, although it is Warren's third novel, it is his best known and contains clear expressions of a number of themes that will inform my discussion of the other novels below.

In his essay, Warren carefully outlines Coleridge's theory of the differences between a symbol and a metaphor or allegory. An allegory is a construct of the intellect and a symbol is a product of pure imagination. In Coleridge's estimation, allegory is something artificial that is created by the writer. Any representative function of an allegory has to be mechanically defined in writing and function metaphorically to "stand for" a particular idea or abstraction. A symbol on the other hand is, "not arbitrary—not a mere sign—but contains within itself the appeal which makes it serviceable as a symbol" ("A Poem" 352). A symbol is not arbitrary; its resonances are self-contained, emerging through natural necessity or congruence within the text. A symbol is "massive," in that it "serves to combine [...] the 'poet's heart and intellect,'" along with the complex of feelings and attitudes that are contained within the symbolic idea.

Warren also notes the division between intellect and imagination in Coleridge's work. He does this by liberating the idea of imagination from any notion of irrelevance or ungrounded fantasy. For Coleridge, in Warren's estimation, intellect is—like allegory—a mechanical process of understanding, but imagination serves a more primal, world-creating function. Coleridge divides the imagination into two levels, primary and secondary. The primary imagination is that which creates our world, through which we are able to "know" our world. "The point," Warren writes, "is that Coleridge attributes to imagination this fundamental significance" (342), and thus the temporal significance his "poem of pure imagination" is not invalidated but empowered by its imaginative faculty. The secondary imagination "an echo" of the primary (342); whereas the primary imagination is a force of creation, the latter is a force of *re*-creation. The secondary imagination is that which allows symbols, in their massive sense, to function. It is one explanation for the sin of the mariner; in murdering the Albatross he is denying the secondary imagination and symbolic importance of the bird.

Warren identifies “two basic themes” in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I will focus on what Warren terms the secondary theme, “the theme of the imagination” (348). One of the primary expressions of this theme can be seen in the different kinds of light that Coleridge uses in the composition of his poem. As Warren says, “There is a constant contrast between moonlight and sunlight, and the main events of the poem can be sorted out according to the kinds of light in which they occur, in the poem the good events take place under the aegis of the moon, the bad events under that of the sun” (365). We see an inversion of the expected order, yet this inversion is deliberately made by Coleridge, to champion the secondary imagination. The implicit argument is thus that the imagination, not the intellect, is the source of real truth.

This, finally, brings us back to the hypnotic opening passage of *All the Kings Men*. Having defined these various aspects of Coleridge’s thought, we can apply to Warren’s use of black and white colors the same symbolic significance as the contrast between moonlight and sunlight in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by substituting black for the moonlight and white for the sunlight. Warren writes:

You look up and the highway is straight for miles, coming at you, with the *black* line down the center coming at you, *black* and slick and tarry-shining against the *white* of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the *white* slab *so that only the black line is clear*, coming at you with the whine of the tires, and if you don’t quit staring at that line and don’t take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you’ll *hypnotize* yourself and you’ll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the *black* dirt shoulder off the slab, and *you’ll try to jerk her back on but you can’t* because the slab is high like a curb,

and maybe you'll try to turn off the ignition just as she starts to dive. But you won't make it, of course. (1 *emphasis mine*)

Just as Coleridge ironically reverses the aegises of night and day, Warren takes the inherent reversal of a concrete slab road to change the conventional world and make it poetry. He describes the road as a brilliant white concrete slab, a new (at the time) product of Willie Stark's progressive administration. This white slab is bordered on both sides by a black dirt shoulder, and divided in the center by a tarry black line. There is no mention of any color besides black and white until after the hypothetical crash, so as not to confuse the issue. We are introduced to these characteristics through the vantage point of a driver, and so we must also approach their significance from that angle. For the driver, the white slab is his means of conveyance, but the part which defines and orders the slab is the black dirt on the shoulders and the black line in the center. Without these borders the slab could not function as a road. The white slab is clearly a product of the intellect, of human action, yet the black dirt on the shoulder occurs naturally. Like the imagination in Coleridge, the black dirt serves a creative function. Without the shoulder, if this road were white concrete on glittering white sand, the slab would have no definition as a road. Further, the central black line (manmade) divides the road and allows traffic to flow in both directions. In this way the black line serves as the secondary imagination, imitating the creative function of the primary. Indeed, Warren emphasizes importance of this line, and thus of the secondary imagination, saying that in the dazzling heat "only the black line is clear" (1). As with moonlight in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, these lines serve a positive and creative function, and as long as the driver maintains his respect for the lines—by maintaining his position between them—good things will result. Yet to cross these lines, with all their symbolic connection to imagination intact, has dire consequences. If the driver falls asleep and ignores the lines, Warren

tells us, he will drift from the road and onto the shoulder, where he will be unable to recover. As with Coleridge's Albatross and Polar Spirit, Warren's symbols of imagination are disposed to exact revenge if their creative role is not respected.

As if to ensure that we, as readers, notice the influence of Coleridge on the novel, Warren provides a direct allusion to *The Rime*. The second paragraph ends with a description of the country ahead: "Where the eight-cylinder jobs come roaring around the curves in the red hills and scatter the gravel like spray, and when they ever get down in the flat country and hit the new slab, God have mercy on the mariner" (3). This phrase most directly parallels line 80 of Coleridge's poem, in the final stanza of the first part. It appears just three lines before we are told of the mariner shooting the albatross. It is a way into the mariner's sin, and by alluding to it here Warren provides us with a clear hint to the thematic heart of the novel—Jack's search for expiation from the sins of the Old South and of history, which is the processing of the traumatic material I have been referring to as unclaimed identity.

Warren's thematic introduction of the colors black and white in the prologue is also extended to a thematic introduction of race. There are no developed characters in the prologue. As such, its people are flat representations of racialized stereotypes, placeholders for tropes and ideas. The driver of the fast moving car is implicitly white, headed to that country in the distance, "Where every boy is Barney Oldfield³, and the girls wear organdy and batiste and eyelet embroidery and no panties on account of the environment" (2). The crashing car of one of these drivers is watched by black workers in the cotton fields who respond with a stereotypical "Lawd God, hit's a-nudder one done done hit!" (2). Moving on to the third paragraph, after the mariner

³ In the context of Warren's deft handling of racial tropes in this prologue, the allusion to Barney Oldfield may be more than just a passing reference to the most notable racecar driver of the time. In 1910, Oldfield participated in an intriguing, though underpublicized, exhibition race against black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson. See: Knott, Rick. "The Jack Johnson V. Barney Oldfield Match Race of 1910; What It Says about Race in America." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 29.1 (2005)

reference, there is another stereotypical set-piece, “the grove of live oaks way off yonder where the big house is, and the white washed shacks [...] where the pickaninny sits like a black Billiken and sucks its thumb and watches you go by” (3). The next paragraph brings pine forests leveled for lumber mills worked by Poor Whites who “came from God knows where” on wagons (3), and the Civil War distilled to “four years of fratricidal strife” (4). The fifth paragraph brings us past “the cotton gin and the power station and the fringe of nigger shacks” (4). Through the accumulation of these images Warren draws in the hegemonic Southern mythos discussed above. Thus this orientalized South becomes the ground that Jack Burden must define his identity against. Furthermore, the racial representations in the prologue can be read as analogous to the black/white contrast discussed above, informed by Warren’s reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Just as the concrete slab is defined by the black dirt at its edges, the white narrator must draw definition from the marginalized black Other. This suggests that Jack Burden’s understanding will require an acceptance of his complicity in the racial history of the South.

Burden will find this understanding through the gradual processing of latent trauma I have referred to as unclaimed identity. His trauma is realized in specific moments of crisis; moments driven by human encounters, most notably with Willie Stark and Cass Mastern. When Jack Burden first meets Willie Stark, Willie is a naïve country cousin. He encounters Stark again when the powers that be select him to run for governor so he can split the vote and secure a win for MacMurfee. When Willie realizes the position he’s in, he spends the night drinking and emerges a vengeful demagogue. Jack notes the moment of transformation, “As I looked at his face now I didn’t see the thin-skinned, boyish face, but another face under it, as though the first face were a mask of glass and now I could see through it to the other one” (116). During Willie’s Mason City stump speech, Jack muses on the changes in Willie’s voice and identity on the

political stage, “But he was saying, ‘—and so I’m not going to make any speech—’ In his old, voice, his own voice. Or was that his voice? Which was his true voice, which of all the voices, you would wonder” (15). What disturbs Jack the most about Willie’s overnight transition from rube to politician is that he thought he had Willie’s identity nailed down. How could “Cousin Willie from the country, the Boy with the Christmas Tie” (490), become the man who tells Jack, “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the diddie to the stench of the shroud” (75)? Jack has to come to terms with this unfixed identity, and he recoils from it. Willie is an enigma and, like the victim of conventional trauma who is forced to relive the past to understand and integrate an experience, Jack is unable to turn from, “the problem of Willie’s personality [which] imperiously occupied my rare hours of speculation” (23). Joseph Lane notes that this problem is of more than personal interest, “Stark's demagoguery itself transforms people around him by changing their view of the nature of the world and the requirements of good action or justice” (Lane). Willie’s transformation sets off a chain reaction which will eventually force Jack to alter his understanding of moral responsibility.

Willie Stark is *a* center of the novel, but its heart lies in the story of Cass Mastern. This is the cast off material from Burden’s doctoral thesis. Jack says that he originally gave up his work on Mastern because, “in the midst of the process I tried to discover the truth and not the facts. Then, when the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood by me, I could not bear to live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts” (236). The facts are easy to discover, but Jack is unable to understand their implications—how could such a seemingly good man be a man capable of sin and can the sinner still be good?

The “facts” that Jack discover are the circumstances of Cass Mastern’s sin and expiation. The revelation of this sin again foregrounds the themes Warren borrowed from Coleridge. It

involves the inverted contrast between black and white, as representations of imagination and intellect (discussed above), and also another Coleridgean theme: the insouciant sin. One of the most striking aspects about the sin of the mariner is how little consideration he gives to killing the Albatross. It is an action he takes simply because he can, without any real motivation behind it. The fundamental terror of the mariner's sin seems to lie in its lack of forethought or apparent motivation. The various sins of Warren's characters have a similar lack of motivation. Each of these characters steps into their sin with a similar insouciance, and each fails to understand their sin until much later—if at all.

Cass Mastern enters into his sin with this conspicuous lack of forethought. As he first appears, Cass is quiet, thoughtful and chaste. He certainly is not the type of man to go looking for an affair with the wife of his closest friend, yet it happens. When Cass first meets Annabelle Trice, Warren again deftly arranges the contrast between dark and light, black and white. In his journal, Cass notes how "dark" the room is when Annabelle enters, and how it made her eyes seem "black." Annabelle remarks "on how dark the room [is]," and commands a servant "to bring light and to mend the fire, which was sunk to ash" (249). Until this point the interaction between the two has been innocent and conducted entirely in a darkened room. Therefore, if Warren's inversion of the typical pattern of light and dark holds true, a less innocent state should emerge with the introduction of the light. Warren calls attention to the moral implications of this change by having the servant boy bring a candlestick and matches. The matches are a popular early brand that was conveniently, for Warren's symbolic purposes, named Lucifer matches. This name is massive in the symbolic sense, representing the entire discourse of sin and punishment. The moral shift facilitated by this change in lighting is immediate. As Annabelle leans to "appl[y] the lucifer to the wicks," Cass notices "how the corset lifted her breasts" (249).

Then as she looks at Cass “over the new candle flames,” he notices that her eyes are not black, but a deep and hypnotic blue. He is entranced by her eyes, “like a man marveling,” and registers his physical response with surprise: “Then I knew that I was blushing and I felt my tongue dry like ashes in my mouth and I was in the manly state” (250). The rest of their affair plays out according to the template of this first scene. Cass blunders blindly into each romantic escalation. At the moment of consummation he notes that he feels some incredulity, but no “horror at the violation of a principle” (254). The entire affair is presented as something which occurs in a trancelike state, blind to consequences, “even in the full and shameless light of day” (256). Nonetheless their actions have consequences, which Cass is violently reminded of with the suicide of his cuckolded friend, Duncan.

This may be Jack’s first exposure to the trauma that Willie Stark will later explosively reacquaint him with—the complexity of identity and the inexactitude of good and evil. The lesson is too much for Jackie Burden, the solipsistic student of history, to accept. He retreats from his study of Cass Mastern’s journal, “not because he could not understand, but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him” (284). Jack retreats from his study, from all traces of that life, and falls into the Great Sleep. Yet the lesson follows him. His former landlady collects the papers and Cass’s journal and sends them to Jack. Jack carries this parcel, unopened, for many years. Jack’s burden is a reminder of the lesson he has not yet learned. It is also a clear allusion to the Ancient Mariner and the Albatross that he wore around his neck. Like the mariner, Jack must work through the recursion of his trauma that he might one day shed his burden.

Jack’s reaction to this first trauma is to reject altogether the problem of identity and external reality by becoming a “brass bound idealist” (45). Jack’s brass-bound Idealism is a

warped and oversimplified version of philosophical Idealism, which he picked up “out of a book [...] in college” (45). He distilled the philosophy down to a single principle: “What you don’t know don’t hurt you, for it ain’t real [...] If you are an Idealist it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn’t real anyway” (45). Yet there is a clear tension in Jack’s Idealism. Mizener writes: “This Idealism was merely Jack Burden’s excuse for living as if the world of time—where people try to do their best according to their dim lights and fail and grow old—were not real” (56). Brass-bound Idealism is Jack’s response to Cass Mastern. It is easier for him to claim a philosophy which rejects objective reality wholesale, than to try to understand the non-ideal reality of experience. Jack knows that his Idealism is just a crutch, but he uses it in the same way the subconscious might mask this existential trauma in dreams: “*They ain’t real, I thought as I walked down the hall, nary one. But I knew they were*” (86). Jack’s faux-Idealism protects him from having to directly confront his unclaimed identity.

It is this retreat from the past that allows Jack to do Willie Stark’s dirty work without qualm, because it isn’t real anyway. Willie, like Jack, is a man who grew up with strong principles, but unlike Jack, Willie adapts to political pragmatism with ease. His transformation from “cousin Willie” to “the Boss” occurs with a sudden obfuscation of his inner moral turmoil behind a Machiavellian pragmatism. Overnight, Stark becomes the kind of man about whom Judge Irwin can say, “you don’t make omelettes without breaking eggs. And precedents. He’s broken plenty of eggs and he may make his omelettes” (186).

It is worth asking, however: what is the exact significance of the latent content Burden retreats from? He does not simply retreat from Mastern’s sin, but from its implications for Jack’s sense of Southern identity. Cass Mastern could be seen as a Southern ideal—chaste, upright, and with a genteel distaste for the ugliness of slavery (though he does not immediately free his

slaves)—but this is tarnished by his sin. Mastern comes to a deathbed epiphany that is far from Old South romanticism; a recognition of complicity and Northern pragmatism. In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren writes, “A people’s way of fighting reflects a people’s way of thinking” (16). The war was the testing ground of pragmatism as embodied by Lincoln. The post-war emergence of pragmatism is the truth Jack Burden discovers in Mastern’s diary. He must square his understanding of identity with that truth. It is only through coming to terms with this pragmatic legacy that Jack is able to understand his own unclaimed identity.

History holds an important place in Warren’s thought and writing. History, filtered through personal experience, is the basis for personal identity. Joan Romano Shifflett writes:

Warren makes clear enough distinctions between *history* and the *past*. In the most general of terms, the word *history* refers to events that have been filtered through the self, while the *past* is a broader, more objective term for the composite list of all events that have occurred in time. (68)

The past is always there, but history requires work, thought, and suffering. As Warren writes in the opening to *The Legacy of the Civil War*, “The Civil War is, for the American imagination, the great single event of our history [...] it may, in fact, be said to *be* American history. Before the Civil War we had no history in the deepest and most inward sense” (3). The Civil War is referred to as the growing pains of the nation, but the paradigmatic initiation that Warren describes is something subtler than the cliché suggests. The unprecedented cost of the Civil War demands the deep consideration that makes history filtered through the individual a possibility.

Jack Burden, as “student of history,” is a prime example of the past filtered through the individual. In his first foray into the past Jack is unable to integrate the truth he encounters. It takes an external challenge, in the form of Willie Stark’s order to dig up dirt on Judge Irwin

(another candidate for ideal Southern gentleman), to force him to confront the past again—and it takes denial, suffering, and much consideration for him to finally integrate that unclaimed material into his identity.

Returning to *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren describes pragmatic thinking as something that existed before the war but was not fully expressed until the War created a favorable climate. The national conflict was driven by two equally self-righteous factions, whom Warren terms the legalists and the “higher law” abolitionists. Each faction felt fully justified in their position and saw no reason for compromise. It was into this tension between competing ideals that Abraham Lincoln was elected. Warren cites historians and philosophers who have “found in Lincoln the model of the pragmatic mind” (17). Lincoln’s leadership presented a powerful endorsement for the utility of pragmatic politics, while the terrible bloodshed of the war displayed the consequences of uncompromising idealism. In *Lincoln’s Tragic Pragmatism*, John Burt sheds light on what Lincoln’s pragmatism might represent for Jack Burden:

Lincoln’s final position, in the Second Inaugural, evinces an ethical generosity toward his enemies that arises from a mature sense of the moral complicity experienced by all fallen and finite beings. Lincoln provides a model for moral agency in a complex world in which one must make one’s way among various half-understood alternatives, none of which leave one’s hands very clean. (28)

In Cass Mastern’s diary, Jack encounters a pair of brothers who embody the conflict between idealism and pragmatism. Cass is an idealist, a product of the Old South. On the other hand, his brother Gilbert is a powerful man and places efficacy far above moral concerns. Like Lincoln, Gilbert is a harbinger of a pragmatic new paradigm, as Jack puts it, “He had lived out of one world and into another. Perhaps he was even more at home in the new than in the old” (244).

The young Jack Burden is a creature of hope and principle but what he finds in the story of Cass Mastern upsets his simplistic vision of the Southern ideal. He finds Cass's affair, his despair, repentance, and death. He finds a story in which the idealist does not win, and in which the winners are men like Gilbert, who could watch his brother march off to a war he doesn't believe in while saying things like, "What we want now they've got us into this is not a good man but a man who can win, and I am not interested in the luxury of Mr. Davis's conscience" (279). Burden is faced with an injustice, that the idealist should suffer and the merely pragmatic should prevail. Worse yet, this is more than just a story. It is the history of his own ancestor, his own blood. Jack retreats from that history, leaving a part of his identity unclaimed.

Jack's second foray into history is much more successful than his first, if we view success purely in terms of the quantity of results. He finds his dirt and then some; in the process learns that the Judge was his real father and contributes to his suicide. Ultimately this research will also teach him to finally come to terms with what, "students of history always learn [...] that the human being is a very complicated contraption and that they are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of bad and the bad out of good, and the devil take the hindmost" (372). Yet before claiming this understanding, Burden once more flees from the identity he has left unclaimed for so long. After discovering Anne Stanton's affair with Stark, Jack runs to California and has his false-mystic vision of "the Great Twitch." After each traumatic recursion—the shocking failure to understand, in turn, Cass Mastern, Willie Stark, and Anne Stanton⁴—Jack recoils from identity and existence. At the end of the novel, he is finally able to integrate these experiences. Blotner writes:

⁴ Not to mention other characters who he initially misjudges including his mother, Judge Irwin, Sadie Burke, and Tiny Duffy. The novel is riddled with moments of traumatic revelation where characters Jack viewed in one way are suddenly revealed to defy his expectations. At these moments he is called to confront his assumptions, their reality, and his own identity, but his repeated choice is to retreat.

Jack's hard-won understanding of the capacity for evil in Willie Stark and Cass Mastern has led to this bitter but necessary self-awareness [...] The attempt to understand Willie's life leads to the attempt to understand history without cynicism or sentimentality (226).

The knowledge that Jack eventually comes to understand, that which was hidden in his initial traumatic encounters with identity, is the knowledge of complicity: "that the human being is a very complicated contraption and that they are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of bad and the bad out of good, and the devil take the hindmost" (372). His knowledge is also the knowledge of the Web in which all things are connected and "if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter" (283). This web is a metaphorical representation of the historical interconnectedness of all things past, present, and future. Complicity is the force that drives the "direction" of actions. It is the demand of a reality driven by the "theory of historical costs. The theory of the moral neutrality of history" (593). Cleanth Brooks writes, "The story of Willie Stark finally has its importance because of the way in which it affects the story of Jack [...] this novel is an account of how Jack Burden came to be [...] capable of understanding the story of Cass Mastern" (22). Of course it is also the story of how Jack became a man capable of understanding the life of Willie Stark. The two are intertwined and inseparable. Historical understanding can only come to Jack as a changed man. Mizener writes:

Jack Burden is, to start with, too like Adam Stanton to believe that the grotesque world he lives in can be put together again, even by all the king's men, and for a long time he refuses to touch it. But in the end he is too much like Willie Stark

not to understand Willie's dying words—"It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that"—and to know he must try. (66)

It is only after all of this has transpired, and after much consideration, that Jack Burden, who once recoiled from the non-ideal reality he found in history, can become a man who is capable, with full internal consideration, of going out "into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of time" (661).

"The awful responsibility of time" is complicity. Complicity as set out by Warren in the recognitions of *Brother to Dragons*:

The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.

The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.

The recognition of direction of fulfillment is the death of the self,

And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.⁵

All else is surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit.

Raised as he was—in the privileged enclave of Burden's Landing surrounded by conservative political views, as from his mother and Governor Stanton, and building military models with Judge Irwin—Jack Burden was shepherded into a romantic view of Southern exceptionalism. He embraced that history as a young adult, which led him to University and an exploration of Cass Mastern's history, but his moral sense was betrayed by that history and, later, by the most influential people from his childhood. The core traumatic material of Jack Burden's unclaimed identity is akin to the realization that caused W.J. Cash to abandon the Lost Cause mythology that he was raised with. His process of integration is a progression from retreating into Idealism

⁵ "Selfhood" as proposed here is essentially synonymous with the claiming and integration of unclaimed identity. When one has fully processed his or her existential trauma and possesses an unfractured identity with the weight of history and complicity behind it, then he or she will have found selfhood. As such, "selfhood" is the product of having claimed the identity that was unclaimed, and I will use the term as such below.

and the West to finally understanding the one concept that will allow him to square his identity as a Southerner with the fraught, yet still proud, history it emerges from—the web of complicity.

John Burt writes about Abraham Lincoln (though it could apply to Burden):

A vision of entangling complicity might motivate one to take a position of moral skepticism. Or it might motivate a morally paralyzed state of impasse, in which one cannot act because one must always do so with dirty hands. But in Lincoln's case the outcome of his vision of entangling complicity is twofold. In the first place it motivates his generosity toward his enemies, his refusal to see them in a demonized way, to see them as somehow of a different moral kind from himself. In the second place, it motivates him to see his most important moral acts as a kind of wager, a kind of leap of faith taken in the face of the absurd. (680)

This vision of complicity is what allows Jack Burden to finally claim the identity he recoiled from in the past. Rather than running from it, or morally excepting himself from the facts of history, Burden is finally able to finish his study of Cass Mastern and prepare to wager his pragmatic moral identity, fully entangled in his history and that of the South.

4. *Night Rider* (1939)

Warren's first novel, published on the threshold of the Second World War, follows Percy Munn, a young lawyer in Bardsville, Kentucky, as he is recruited by Bill Cristian to join with the other members on the board of the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco. The stated goal of the Association is to collectivize small growers and tenant farmers and demand higher prices from tobacco buyers—a noble cause that devolves into corruption and violence. *Night Rider* forms part of a continuum running through Warren's first three novels—*Night Rider*, *At Heaven's Gate*, and *All the Kings Men*—with regard to how he depicts individual attempts to integrate unclaimed identity in the pursuit of selfhood. William Bedford Clark sees the progression in the three novels as a political move, “from dark skepticism to guarded hope” (71), but I am more concerned with how this shift is represented in their character's handling of identity and trauma.⁶ That progression from skepticism to hope can also be conceptualized as a move from a failed pursuit of selfhood to a successful one. Percy Munn represents a character who, through his complete lack of historical sense, is unable to process his unclaimed identity and ultimately dies a failure—yet that very failure sets the foundation for Jack Burden's success.

Of Warren's first three novels, *Night Rider* is the darkest and most pessimistic of the three. It is also, the most deeply flawed—by flawed I mean deficient in terms of its execution of a philosophical schema Warren had not yet perfected. In a 1957 interview conducted by Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter, Warren says:

I think I ought to say that behind *Night Rider* and my next novel, *At Heaven's Gate*, there was a good deal of the shadow not only of the events of that period

⁶ James H. Justus also notes this progression, in a way that comes closer to my focus: “Integration of the self, not the merits of the political strongman, is the chief concern [...] Warren dramatizes this moral issue so well in *All the King's Men* partly because his earlier efforts to concretize the theme in character and narration [...] in *Night Rider* (1939) and *At Heaven's Gate* (1943)” (160).

but of the fiction of that period. [...] But in some kind of a fumbling way I was aware, I guess, of trying to find the dramatic rub of the story at some point a little different from and deeper than the point of dramatic rub in some of the then current novels. But what I want to emphasize is the fact that I was fumbling rather than working according to plan and convictions already arrived at. (Watkins 30)

In *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism*, John Burt, drawing on Richard Law and others, notes that the “fiction of that period” Warren was responding to was naturalist fiction, such as Frank Norris’ *The Octopus*. The “fumbling” and tension of the novel is that it draws on naturalist tools to present a decidedly un-naturalist theme—a tension, “between its avowed naturalism and its desire to discover some seat of human integrity and articulate self-knowledge in a world where both, next to natural force, must appear to be only illusions and can never be coughed for with confidence” (Burt *RPW* 129). Warren attempts to address naturalism by approaching it on its own field and then moving beyond naturalist determinism to something morally and ontologically more abstract.⁷

In *Night Rider*’s opening passage, Percy Munn arrives in Bardsville by train on a morning when men had come from many miles around to support the founding of the Association. He is uncomfortably crowded into the train with many others. William Bedford Clark notes the classist undertones of Munn’s discomfort, “Mr. Munn wants what his fellow passengers want, but he is set off from them by virtue of education and status. *He* is a gentleman, and the stench of stale sweat and whiskey sickens him” (69). This aspect is certainly there, but a deeper resonance of his discomfort is revealed as the passengers disembark, “And as the

⁷ I will note here that, while I agree with the basic premise of Burt’s reading, for my current purpose I am more concerned with the “fumbling” that results from Warren developing his philosophy and how to portray it through fiction. Thus, below Warren’s address to naturalism will be taken as an implicit ground and my treatment will focus on Warren’s philosophy as it relates to unclaimed identity.

movement of the crowd pushed him toward the door, Mr. Munn again resented that pressure that was human because it was made by human beings, but was inhuman, too, because you could not isolate and blame any one of those human beings who made it” (3). What Munn resents in this moment—that human, yet inhuman pressure—is exactly the recognition of complicity. A pressure made by humans but from which you cannot isolate any individual for blame is a perfect metaphor for the web of complicity that Jack Burden recognizes. Yet rather than recognizing this as one of the foundations of complicity, Munn resents it. Complicity and community continue to be the unifying thread of Munn’s thoughts throughout the day, though he is only consciously aware of the community—he is not yet able to recognize complicity.

Another suggestive moment occurs when Munn is on the platform with the leaders of the Association. Mr. Sills is reading a list of names in support of the Association and Munn has an early vision of the web:

Then it occurred to him that behind all the names he was hearing without attention were other men, scattered over the section, in other countries, perfectly real men [...] From that paper invisible threads, as it were, stretched off [...] to those men. They were all webbed together by those strands, parts of their beings [...] an idea seized parts of their individual beings and held them together and made them coalesce. (16)

Mr. Munn is musing on complicity, though he does not realize it. Each of those men, caught in the web of the Association, is equally complicit in all the ugliness that will come out of it, and not one of them knows yet what that will be.

Munn is surprised to hear his own name and to be called to address the crowd. Beginning his speech, Mr. Munn’s glance falls upon a man at the edge of the platform, “a lanky, stooped

man of about fifty, wearing faded blue overalls and a straw hat” (25). The man is staring directly at him, and Munn has another epiphany at his recognition of that Othered attention: “Then, at that instant, he realized with a profound force that that man there was an individual person, not like anybody else in the world. He realized the fact more profoundly than he had ever realized it about his friends or even his wife” (25). Munn goes on to deliver an impassioned speech about the responsibilities of the people in the crowd, telling them there is no hope in the success of the Association except in that which they brought with them. The speech “welled up powerfully in him,” and he spoke as a man inspired. William Bedford Clark sees in this moment the germ of a “collectivity,” which would later find expression in the Association:

Munn’s eloquence, his capacity for leadership, indeed his whole sense of purpose, are derived from the country man in the crowd. In return, Munn provides the silent man with a voice and a vision that give structure to his otherwise incommunicable aspirations. Each man alone is inarticulate and impotent; together they can act in an effort to make the vision real. (70)

The speech itself launches Mr. Munn’s nascent political career, and yet it is not the most important part of that day in his memory and estimation: “And afterward he could never remember precisely what he had said, though he remembered in perfect clarity the face of the man in the faded blue overalls who had stood just below the platform and had looked up at him” (26). The memory of the man he saw that day becomes a site of trauma for Mr. Munn. It is a trauma that he will return to many times throughout the novel, the trauma of two conflicting realizations: complicity and interconnectedness as opposed to the recognition of agency and individuality in the Other. The core of Mr. Munn’s unclaimed identity is the slow attempt to integrate these two truths.

The speech, and especially his recognition of the man in the overalls, becomes such a site of trauma for Munn, that any thought or utterance of that moment becomes indistinguishable from an utterance of the trauma. While at a Christmas gathering in the home of Senator Tolliver, Benton Todd, the Captain's son, is eager to meet Mr. Munn. As a young law student, Todd is eager to talk with Munn. He is also compelled by the story Lucille Christian told him about Munn's speech. "I wish I'd been here last summer and heard your speech," he says. Munn cannot take credit for the speech, calling it an accident, but when he tries to speak of it his words go to the same place that his memories do:

‘There was an old man there,’ he began, ‘standing just at the edge of the platform. When I got up I saw him. I just saw him there’ [...] Mr. Munn realized that he did not remember what he had actually said that day at the rally. Instead, he only remembered the face of that old man. That was what seemed important now, but it was hard to find the words for the importance. (104)

What Munn is doing here is, in effect, what Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, defines through the metaphor of “writing trauma,” which involves “processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic ‘experiences’ (186). Munn is attempting to process his unclaimed identity by “giving voice” to the site of the trauma—the face of the old man, and not the words of the speech—but he cannot complete this process because he lacks an understanding of the complicity that the man represents. Interestingly, LaCapra contrasts writing trauma with the similar, but distinct, act of writing *about* trauma:

Writing about trauma is an aspect of historiography related to the project of reconstructing the past as objectively as possible without necessarily going to the

self-defeating extreme of single-minded objectification that involves the denial of *one's implication in the problems one treats*. (186, Emphasis mine)

What is the denial of one's implication but the denial of complicity? Without a realization of complicity, Munn is able to work through his unclaimed identity, but he is not able to complete the process and approach that material as one who writes (thinks, speaks) *about* trauma.

Despite beginning with noble ambitions, the Association becomes increasingly more corrupt as its conflict with the tobacco buyers wears on. Munn starts to fall into the perversity of the situation and begins to act more callous himself. This is first plainly evident when he speaks to his wife, May, about Senator Tolliver's lawsuit against the Association, "saying that the Association would probably lose. And saying it because he wanted, as he discovered at that moment with a cold sense of satisfaction, to deepen that look of concern on her face, to frighten her, to make her aware of the evil and instability of the world, to make her suffer" (127). His misplaced aggression says more about his own inner state than it does about May or the Association. He himself is just starting to realize "the evil and instability of the world" and, like a frightened child, he drags May into his discomfort.

Percy Munn's increasing inner turmoil and external violence is fueled by Bill Christian, whose hot-headed exclamations frequently call for more than monetary revenge on the tobacco buyers. Yet that violence has no outlet and only minimal encouragement before Professor Ball and Doctor MacDonald found the Free Farmers' Brotherhood of Protection and Control, and adopt tactics of vandalism and terrorism. Bedford Clark astutely notes the fitting rhetorical character of the name:

Munn and his fellows have moved beyond the limits of a voluntary 'association' and are now joined together in an irrational intimacy that, quite significantly,

approximates ties of blood. These 'Free Farmers' surrender any real freedom they might claim once they take an oath to obey unquestioningly the commands of their superiors. (75)

Though he may not see through this guise to the ultimate surrender of freedom and enactment of violence that the Brotherhood represents, Munn does display some distrust of the idea. When he is first asked to join the Brotherhood, Professor Ball and Doctor MacDonald ask Munn to give them a list of names and to speak to some men who might be interested in joining. He responds, "I'll give you a list [...] but I won't speak to anybody until after I've joined myself. Until After. I don't know why, but that's just the way I feel about it" (145). His feelings here precede his understanding. He is subconsciously preparing for the violence and trauma that will come later, but his conscious mind has not yet begun to process this as anything more than a feeling. Munn experiences this unbidden reticence again when he actually goes to join the association. When he approaches the old mill where his initiation is to take place, he finds himself alone at the edge of a dark field, a wide, open expanse that he has to traverse to reach the mill. He is disconcerted because he expected to find people there but all was still and silent, "he felt an almost overmastering impulse to stop in the shadow where he was, not to cross that open space" (151). Percy Munn is a victim of his inner turmoil. A part of what makes him such a tragic failure is that his instinctual reactions and perceptions are so often accurate, yet he is unable to turn this perceptiveness inward and he remains a stranger to himself.

With regard to the two architects of the Brotherhood, Doctor MacDonald represents the military arm while Professor Ball provides the ideological philosophy. William Bedford Clark notes that, though his agrarian philosophy and vision of a polity modeled after the Roman republic provided the foundation for the Brotherhood, Ball is quick to retreat into situational

ethics and ultimately religious fanaticism (76-7). His ideology disintegrates, but it does provide a lens through which to view the Brotherhood. One of the most ideologically telling moments is when Professor Ball invokes Cicero and the farmer/hero Cincinnatus as the model of a leader. Ball quotes, “He says”—and he fixed his gaze secretly upon Mr. Christian, and then, in turn, upon the other two men, “he says, ‘a villa in senatum arcessebatur et Curius et ceteri senes, ex quo qui eos arcessebant viatotes nominati sunt’” (144). The quotation—which translates to: “Curius and certain old men were summoned from a villa to the senate, on account of which those who summoned them were called travelers.”—comes from the dialogue *De Senectute* (Concerning Old Age), which discusses the benefits of farming in old age. The men of the villa (farmers) had a grounded sense of place, and were therefore able to provide what the travelers could not—history (McCarron 115). Ball’s quotation of Cicero therefore implies that, in his view, an ideal republic would be governed by the farmers of the land. “Ironically, in *Night Rider* all the leaders of the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco fail to achieve an iota of the stature of a Cincinnatus or an M. Curius” (115).

One of Munn’s primary sites of trauma occurs early in the novel—the trial of Bunk Trevelyan for the murder of his neighbor, Mr. Duffy. Percy Munn defends Trevelyan in the trial and was, at the time, convinced of his client’s innocence. To prove this supposed innocence, Munn performs warrantless searches on the homes of nearby black tenant farmers. He finds the murder weapon in the kitchen of an unnamed black man. The man claims that he merely found the knife that was hidden under his corncrib. Munn doesn’t believe the farmer, and so that man hangs while Trevelyan walks free. Later, Munn realizes he was wrong, but it is far too late. The unfortunate farmer is so utterly marginalized that he is deprived of a name, a fair trial, and ultimately of his life. His home, the only space in which he is ever seen or heard from, is the

hallmarked Orientalized image of black underclass life, and the man himself a stock representation of internal difference in the Othered South. Warren draws attention to this marginalization, toward the end of the novel, when Munn tries to remember the man's absent name while hiding out in the woods near Willie Proudfit's farm. James Justus notes, "His obsessive attempt to remember the name leads him to reconstruct a complete, though imaginary, history of the man. He recounts with abnormal sensitivity the complete details of his office and his associates" (168). Yet he does this because he sees in the name a chance to recover other parts of his life that have been lost, not because he has developed any fresh sympathy for the man. Justus continues, "It is almost an unconscious will that chooses to seize and name the element that can give back definition to objects once familiar to him [...] And his desperate attempt to define objects rather than self further emphasizes the loss" (168). This incident represents one of the primary reasons why Munn will fail to integrate his unclaimed identity. As I discussed above, the racial politics of the South, as history and lived experience, constitutes a large part of the traumatic material of Southern identity. For Munn to claim that material he would need to come to terms with his complicity in terms of that societal truth, but he is unable to do that until he accepts his complicity in the death of the unnamed man that hung in Trevelyan's stead—he spends much of the novel running from his guilt.

Munn's guilt is at the forefront of his mind when he confronts Bunk Trevelyan for trying to blackmail Tom Sorrell. Munn visits Trevelyan on behalf of the association, ostensibly to confront the man that had betrayed their trust, but he has personal motives as well: to confront him about Duffy's murder, "He had been going to say, 'Trevelyan, you killed that man. Answer Me.' He had not said it. He had said something else. He had been afraid. But not of Trevelyan" (191). He was afraid of complicity, though he did not know enough to admit that to himself.. As

Mr. Silks had recently reminded Munn, “maybe [Trevelyan] was guilty. A feller who could do what he’s just done [blackmail], could do— [...] The nigger is dead that had the knife, and you can’t unhang him” (183). Later, when he returns with a band of night riders to scare Trevelyan off, Mr. Munn finally brings himself to pose the question of Duffy’s murder, but he cannot bear to hear the answer. Immediately after he demands an answer, “The pistol exploded in Mr. Munn’s grasp” (200). As with his original speech in Bardstown, he experiences this site of trauma as an accident. It is the pistol and not the man that has agency in Trevelyan’s murder. Mr. Munn can’t even be sure if it was his shot, the anonymous second shot, or both that actually struck the man. Furthermore, John Burt notes, “By the time Munn finally kills Trevelyan he has so lost his bearings that he is not sure whether he does so on account of the trial or on account of the Association. In fact, Munn is not even sure whether his belated certainty of Trevelyan’s guilt in the murder case is not a convenient rationalization for the murder of Trevelyan” (*RPW* 129). Again Munn is desperately trying to justify his actions rather than confronting his own guilt and complicity.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Mr. Munn discovers that he doesn’t feel at all like he expected he would. He tries to “delude his senses into the absolute emptiness, the loneliness, which he thought he must have” (201). He dwells momentarily on whether his shot had hit Trevelyan, but dismisses it as unimportant: “He experienced a sense of release, of pleasure, at the discovery of its unimportance” (202). But while Munn is right that the question of whether his bullet killed Trevelyan is insignificant, he is wrong to revel in that fact. It is insignificant because of Mr. Munn’s complicity—he is equally guilty whether the bullet struck or no, just as he is equally guilty of the death of the unnamed black farmer, regardless of whether he thought he was serving the interests of justice at the time. Munn tries to reject the question of his guilt, and

ignores completely the issue of his complicity, but his body holds him to account. He finds himself becoming physically ill as he rides toward his home, “The knowledge which his mind denied rose in his bowels. I’m sick, he thought, it’s just that I’m a little sick” (203). He vomits.

Munn is in a state of confusion but he also is driven to continue acting on violent impulse. He culminates the increasing sadism he had displayed toward May in earlier passages by raping her. The impact of this act cannot be overstated. Bedford Clark argues that the rape represents a moment more monstrous than the murder Munn had just committed:

Such lawless excess [as Trevelyan’s murder] might be mitigated by arguing that the association and brotherhood constitute a law (of sorts) unto themselves. But the rape of May, though Warren has subtly prepared the reader for it, is a ferocious attack upon human communion, in effect a blasphemous denial of natural law. (78)

From this point on, a certain irony will be necessary in my discussion of this novel. Below I will continue to address Munn’s unclaimed identity as if integration and the beginning of selfhood were a still a real possibility for him, but it is clear that after this moment—more so than after the trial or even after the murder—that failure is the only possible outcome. Selfhood requires recognition of complicity and membership in a human community, but Munn forecloses on both those possibilities with this heinous act. For the reader, it comes as almost a relief that May leaves the home, for good, before he wakes up the next morning.

Mr. Munn experiences the traumatic recursion of that night when, sometime later, he learns that May is pregnant. This knowledge manifests in a dream where May comes to him holding a bundle wrapped in newspaper. Inside the paper he finds a fetus with Trevelyan’s face. The living fetus tries to speak to Munn, and May begins to laugh. Hearing her, Munn desires to

stop her laughter by striking her, lest, “everything would shrivel and be blotted out and devoured, and there would be nothing but that soundless ferocity of laughter and himself alone in the midst of it” (396). Clark notes, “There is no more compelling index to Munn’s perdition. The political and personal poles of his damnation meet here” (78-79). This dream is also the intersection of his traumatic pursuit of identity and the conventional trauma of his sins. In fact, as Munn fails to ultimately process his unclaimed identity, it could be argued that the traumatic guilt of his transgressions is so great that it prevents him from fully exploring his potential selfhood.

Another traumatic recursion occurs when Munn goes dove hunting on his property. He sets out without forethought, simply picking up a shotgun and heading to the field as if consciously to trying to break out of the sedentary depression he fell into after his attacks on Trevelyan and May. The symbolic ties between the Brotherhood’s activities and Munn hunting doves are almost too obvious to warrant comment, but the connections go beyond that. When the first dove flies over the clearing where Munn stands he raises the gun, but cannot bring himself to pull the trigger. As usual, lacking any conscious awareness of why his body rebels, he dismisses the protection of his subconscious perceptions. When the second dove comes over, he shoots it, but while retrieving the carcass he is assailed by a nausea like that he felt after Trevelyan’s death. As a result, “He left the bird where it lay, one wing in the water. Some animal, he thought, would find and devour it” (221). Munn doesn’t note the similarity between this carcass and the corpse of Trevelyan that was also left to be devoured in the water, but the correspondence is clear. Like the victim of PTSD, Munn is forced to relive his trauma in this moment, but he is not consciously aware of the close connection between this moment and the one before. Attempting to process the psychic excess of his action, but with no inkling of the content of his identity that has been left unclaimed, Munn is simply left with the obvious

conclusion, “Something’s the matter with me [...] Something’s the matter, I’ve got to stop this” (221).

As the novel progresses, rather than beginning to process his unclaimed material, Mr. Munn seems to begin losing track of his identity all together. This is apparent after his illicit relationship with Lucille Christian begins. What draws these two together is, in a sense, a recognition of a kindred inner confusion. Lucille Christian is no more sure of her identity than Munn is of his. Furthermore, she attempts to understand him, but can get no closer than a fabrication based on his exterior projection. When he tells her that he is not “sure” all the time, she responds, “I thought you were, always [...] Because you look that way. The way you move. The way you say something. You say it like you were sure [...] just everything. And I’m not the only person who feels that. Other people do, too. They have the same impression” (240). Of course for the reader, with insight into Munn’s thoughts, it’s hard to imagine him being sure *any* of the time—let alone always. For his part, he does see something of the situational variability of Lucille’s outer projection, “You know, you’re almost like two people to me [...] the one who’s here right now, and that other one I just see around but never really talk to” (241). Though he comes closer to the mark, he still finds Lucille inscrutable—she is profoundly Othered. Yet this scene continues, and its core is not the impossibility of knowing the Other but the impossibility of self-knowledge. “It’s hard to be just one person” Lucille Christian says:

If everything, everything you were and wanted and owed to people — everything — matched up just once, even for just a minute so you were really one person, completely, then you would be almost too happy to live [...] and it would be like when you love somebody, and are in their arms, like that very instant, only more [...] But, you don’t know you are you then. You just know that you are. (241)

The irony of her speaking these words while the two lay in bed together—lovers but not in love—is palpable. Ultimately, Munn suggests that maybe even then, at that moment of profound congruence, you would not know who you are, and Lucille seems to agree, saying, “No [...] I’m sure you wouldn’t know” (242). At the end of their exchange, which began with the impossibility of knowing the Other, any possible knowledge of the self is denied and abandoned.

After the Brotherhood’s situation further deteriorates and Doctor MacDonald is arrested, Mr. Munn stands in his Bardstown office, looking out the window at the springtime trees and thinking about impermanence:

Death grew in you like the leaves on the trees in spring, gentle and tender and unobtrusive, and then, in the moment of knowledge, was already luxuriant, full-blown, blotting out familiar objects. If not the small pain in the side, some word you spoke, some careless gesture, some momentary concession to vanity, some burst of pity, or some trivial decision – that was the bud, the leaf swelling toward recognition. (350)

The bud, the recognition that Munn is approaching in these moments is in one sense that knowledge of mortality and the impartiality of death, but this momentary Being-toward-death is also a move toward recognition in the sense that Warren would later use the term in *Brother to Dragons*—a recognition of complicity and a move toward selfhood. His reflections continue, now focused on the movement from personal memory to processed history: “The things you remembered, they were what you were. But every time you remembered them you were different [...] until the time came when, all at once, there was the difference” (352). This reflects another of Warren’s core recognitions from *Brother to Dragons*, “the death of the self,” which Munn will

approach later in the novel, but for now the conflict between his ego and his personal history prevents the beginning of selfhood.

Soon thereafter, Mr. Munn goes to visit Doctor MacDonald in his cell. They talk about the failure of the Association and Munn tells MacDonald that the board voted to sell their tobacco. MacDonald takes an essentialist position on the situation: “It just wasn’t in them [...] one way or another that’s what a man does. What’s in him” (355). This position is a continuation of the destructive path that Munn had been following the Brotherhood down. It is antithetical to the philosophy Jack Burden discovers in *All the King’s Men*, and that Warren was “fumbling” toward in *Night Rider*. With his Calvinist focus on an essential moral character, MacDonald is enshrining the self, whereas Warren’s recognitions cause for its erasure—the beginning of selfhood follows the death of the self. To his credit, despite the gulf between his confused self and the unclaimed identity of his selfhood, Munn is wise enough to reject MacDonald’s claim—though his counterargument is equally problematic: “*Why* don’t matter [...] We’re licked. The reason for things is gone. For what we did” (356). An acceptance of complicity requires an equal acceptance of history—both of the past filtered through the self and of personal action. The philosophy Munn expresses here would lead to the problematic ends-driven action that Willie Stark favored, but it is not the final transmutation of his understanding.

Less than five days later, Munn would be a fugitive on the run after Professor Ball assassinates Al Turpin, who had testified against the Brotherhood and Doctor MacDonald, from Munn’s office window. He is taken to Willie Proudfit’s farm to hide out. Proudfit will eventually become a teacher for Mr. Munn, in that his stories will teach Munn something about history, but first he imparts the news that Doctor MacDonald had been released from jail. Munn realizes that this means that MacDonald will leave Kentucky and head west to start over, as the Doctor said

he would. This realization sends Munn into despair as he tries and fails to think beyond his immediate moment: “He did not have the seed of the future in himself, the live germ. It had shriveled up and died” (390). The scene next moves into a profound *ubi sunt* reflection, as he thinks back to when that seed of the future still lived in his chest and to his memories of key moments in his life, but he finds, “only the new numbness, the new isolation” (390). In this scene, Munn reveals his fear—fear of being caught and of hanging. The authentic Being-toward-death that he experienced earlier, complete with its potential to foster understanding, is here absent, replaced instead by fear and caution.

Munn’s thoughts are also occupied by the crime he is accused of. He seems to regret that his actions do not match his perceived guilt. He considers that if he had actually killed Turpin, then his predicament would be a easier to understand and endure. He tries to “think himself” into the situation where he had actually done it and considers that: “The deed, then, would have been his; he could have lived in it; and in its consequence. Certainly, it would have been different from this” (392). But, of course, with a fuller understanding of complicity Munn would realize that the deed *is* his, whether he pulled the trigger or no. As it is a part of his shared history and public past, Munn is complicit in all that transpires. It is not a coincidence that during this time of reflection Munn would also, “think of that negro man, the one who had had the knife, Trevelyan’s knife” (392). Even with that example from his own history Munn still cannot fully recognize complicity. John Burt notes the importance of transgression in Warren’s conception of selfhood, “The necessary precondition of selfhood [...] is transgression, and its first lessons are that one is irreconcilably at odds with one’s world and that one’s every attempt to justify one’s self entraps one that much the more in irony, reversal, unanticipated consequences, and self-

betrayal” (*RPW* 137). Percy Munn has no lack of transgression, but his stubborn refusal to confront his guilt and history bars him from the recognitions leading to selfhood.

That being said, history is ultimately what drives Mr. Munn as close to the recognitions as he will come. Up until this point, Munn seems determined to ignore or subvert all sense of history, but talking with Willie Proudfit gives him a glimpse of what it means to be grounded through one’s history. Munn and Proudfit have long talks about Proudfit’s history in the West. The story is one of restless displacement, but it is crucially a story of history filtered through the self, not of the dead past. His father left Kentucky for Arkansas in the early days of the Civil War, Willie himself left Arkansas to seek his own fortunes in Kansas and Oklahoma, finally returning to Kentucky when he could no longer make a living hunting buffalo. It is likely that he will soon have to leave Kentucky again, when he defaults on the mortgage for the farm, and try to make a fresh start, possibly in Oklahoma. Yet, unlike Munn, the seed of the future is not dead in Willie Proudfit, and neither is the past. In a 1938 letter to Allen Tate, Warren discussed Proudfit as a man with a firm commitment to history who had taken some essential knowledge out of his past: “Proudfit is a man who has been able to pass beyond his period of ‘slaughter’ into a state of self-knowledge. If he is not at home in the world, practically (losing his place, etc.), he is at least at home with himself, has had his vision” (quoted in Blotner 172).

There is only one other character in the novel with any claim to a mature selfhood built on history and that is Captain Todd, whose cool composure Munn so admires during the first meeting of the Association board he attends. While the others are passionately drawn into the moment, Todd remains stoic and rational. He is able to remain collected because he has an understanding of history filtered through experience, as Warren’s schema in *The Legacy of the Civil War* presents it. Percy Munn tentatively realizes this, “Perhaps you could only get to be like

Captain Todd if you lived through some firm conviction, some enveloping confidence, some time in your life; that is, if you were stout enough to come out on the other side of it afterward and still be yourself” (43). Captain Todd is able to exist with confident selfhood because he distilled it through his history. Munn has no such store, and he recognizes this as well, thinking, “He would be caught up and drawn, in the very face of Captain Todd’s example, into the same current that gripped the other men about him” (44). However, as perceptive as he is, Munn is unable to see the need for a sense of personal history in his life. The Christmas episode suggests this lack. Munn is able to recognize the coming tempest, but only in retrospect. He thinks:

All the elements that were to combine in a more violent chemistry had been present, it later seemed upon looking back, that Christmas at the Senator’s house [...] The signs of the future had been there in all his experiences of that time, but he had lacked the key, the clue to the code, and had seen only the ignorant surface [...] he was to demand of himself: If I couldn’t know myself, how could I know any of the rest of them? (113)

The key that Munn lacked is the key to selfhood, Warren’s recognitions. It’s telling that Captain Todd is grounded enough to withdraw from the Association before things become really violent. Without a firm sense of history and complicity, Munn could not match the older man’s confidence nor his perceptiveness.

Others in the association have a sense of the historic character of their moment, but no firm commitment to history. Professor Ball is the only other character with a significant investment in the past, but it is just that, investment in the classical past, not history filtered through personal experience. It is no surprise that Professor Ball’s efforts in the Brotherhood turn to violence and fall apart. Warren confessed to Bill Moyers in a 1976 interview, “I don’t know

how you can have a future without a sense of the past” (Cronin 95). Written nearly forty years earlier, *Night Rider* dramatizes this anxiety. Mr. Munn, Mr. Christian, Mr. Sill, Professor Ball, and others involved in the Association all lack a sense of history, and thus their vision of the future crumbles. Willie Proudfit has a sense of history, and as such he has the living seed of the future in him.

It is possible that Mr. Munn would come to learn important lessons from Proudfit in time, but, in a characteristic moment of rashness, he leaves to confront Senator Tolliver, on whose shoulders Munn still places the blame for the Association’s failure. In the novel’s climactic final scene, Munn stands over Tolliver with a revolver in his hand. Tolliver is weakened and sitting in his bed. The dialogue in this scene shows that Munn has come painfully close to the recognitions, “‘I’m going to kill you,’ he declared. ‘It’ll be a favor to kill you. A favor for you. If I didn’t kill you, you’d lie here, in this house, and be nothing. Nothing; and you thought you something. You still think so’” (456). His obsession with being nothing is just a shade shy of the death of the self that Warren says comes with the recognition of the direction of fulfillment, but, as close as he came, Percy Munn’s false-recognition is still profoundly ego driven. Tolliver sees this, and responds, “A man never knows what he is, Perse. You don’t know what you are, Perse. You thought you knew, one time, Perse” (456). But Munn has come too far to accept this, he says, “I do know. I’m nothing [...] But when I do it, I won’t be nothing. It came to me, Do it, do it and you’ll not be nothing. Like that, like words, it came into my head, and I came here. To kill you” (456-457). In this moment, one of his last, Munn reveals his tragic failure to attain selfhood. Nothingness is so close to selflessness, but rather than accept this freeing resignation, Munn seeks to reinforce the self through violence, but, as if to add insult to injury, he finds he cannot shoot Tolliver. Refusing to be calmed, and refusing to accept, he looks around wildly,

“like an animal” (459). They hear a noise from the soldiers outside, and Munn retreats through the side door, but it is too late. He tries to escape and is shot while crossing the field. In his final moments he feels some sort of certainty, “As he lifted the revolver, he was certain. He was certain,” but what he was certain of is ambiguous and he dies while, significantly, listening to the soldiers, “calling emptily, like the voices of boys at a game in the dark” (460). All the actions of Percy Munn, the association, and the Brotherhood are simultaneously reduced to the acts of boys playing soldier and statesman.

Percy Munn’s failure to attain selfhood is not surprising. Unclaimed identity is the latent content of the past and time and again Munn displays a complete ignorance of history. Unlike Jack Burden, he is not a student of history, driven to process that content as filtered through experience. His failure is ultimately a manifestation of Robert Penn Warren’s development as a fictionist at the time he was writing the novel. Though Warren had been fundamentally concerned with questions of the South and of history for a number of years, his philosophy was not yet fully formed—more crucially he had not yet arrived at a way to display his philosophy in fiction, though he was “fumbling” at it. Munn’s failure is a necessary failure, as are the failures I will discuss below (in *At Heaven’s Gate*) so that Warren could formulate the path to selfhood realized by Jack Burden in his third novel.

5. *At Heaven's Gate* (1943)

Warren's second novel centers on the life of Sue Murdock, the daughter of a wealthy financier and businessman in Nashville, Tennessee. I want to begin by discussing an unfortunate injustice in the history of critical writing about *At Heaven's Gate*. That injustice is the tendency among some of Warren's most insightful critics to refer to Gerald Calhoun as the novel's protagonist, rather than Sue Murdock. In a novel that focuses in turn on: Sue's relation to her father, Sue's relationship with Jerry, Jerry's relation to Sue's father and his associates, Sue's father's relation to everyone in his economic and political sphere, Sue's relationship with Slim Sarrett, Sue's relationship with Sweetie Sweetwater, and finally Jerry's reaction to Sue's death—somehow the prevailing opinion is that the novel revolves around Jerry Calhoun. In *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, James Justus' first reference to Jerry Calhoun occurs three pages before the first mention of Sue Murdock. He attributes to Jerry the roles of "protagonist" (149) and the "most important" figure "who suffer[s] psychically" and is "flanked by others" (160), whereas his treatment of Sue is cynical and dismissive. Blotner's discussion of the novel also mentions Jerry before Sue. He first identifies her as simply "Young Sue Murdock, his lover," and later as "a neurotic," though he does note that she is "a victim" (205). William Bedford Clark does a little better in *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, when he writes, "[Sue] has been emotionally co-opted from birth, and her pathetic and ineffectual efforts to achieve a measure of autonomy end in a self-destructive spiral that serves as an index of the degree to which she has always remained the dependent child of her ruthless father" (84). Yet he too refers to Jerry as "the novel's central figure" (85). It is perhaps unsurprising that these critics focus more on Jerry than Sue, for the reason that she does appear passive at first glance. In a letter to Frank Owsley, the novel's dedicatee, Alan Tate responded to Owsley's privately

expressed criticism of the novel: “I am sorry to confess that I agree with you about Red’s novel, certainly about his pushover women” (Blotner 208). My purpose here then, is to argue that Sue’s “pushover” appearance is not due to her own moral failing, but to the controlling influence of her father and a succession of domineering lovers.

James Justus suggests that *At Heaven’s Gate* is “the closest Warren ever came to writing an agrarian novel,” in that it establishes the New South as a “homegrown wasteland”⁸ and further “The values associated with southern Agrarianism—integration of personality, mutual responsibility, and a general harmony of man and nature—are conspicuously missing in the lives of the major characters, but their very absence is a measure of their importance” (180). These values are synonymous with Warren’s recognitions and concepts of selfhood and complicity, and Justus notes that the lack of these values is caused by “the combined effects of technology, finance capitalism, and political power” (180). However, he does not in conjunction with this conspicuous absence note that Sue, the character who should by all structural right be the one to realize these values, is blocked from their recognition by the patriarchal control of the series of men she tries to gain self-knowledge from⁹. In fact, he argues that Sue is such a vapid young woman that the men cannot save her despite their best efforts: “Sue has no external goals and little internal discipline; her lovers supply her with the outline (and as much substance as they can) for the creation of a new self” (188). While these lovers may supply the outline, or even the substance, they also hinder Sue’s pursuit of selfhood, except in the liminal spaces between the end of one relationship and the in earnest beginning of the next.

⁸ In an insightful essay titled “Self-Knowledge, the Pearl of Pus, and the Seventh Circle: The Major Themes in *At Heaven’s Gate*,” later commended in William Bedford Clark’s *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, John L. Longly Jr. argues that the inhabitants of this Waste Land belong to the seventh circle of Dante’s hell: the damnation of usurers and sinners against natural law. Warren’s own letters corroborate this theory.

⁹ He does note that they “share [Bogan] Murdock’s talent for manipulating others” (187), but does not extend this theme to their hindrance of Sue’s progression toward attaining selfhood.

The novel opens with Sue Murdock standing near the paddock on the Murdock ranch with her brother, Ham, and Slim Sarrett. She is awaiting the return of Jerry Calhoun from New York City. She looks to the sky, trying to see his plane coming: “Sue Murdock stared at the sky, northward, and narrowed her eyes against the light. She could see nothing in the sky” (3). She is watching partly out of a girlish romanticism, the future relationship between the two is almost a forgone conclusion, but she struggles against this part of herself. It is a struggle that hints at the core of her unclaimed identity. In a sense it is a trauma that occurred long before the novel begins, though it contains numerous moments of recursion. Sue Murdock was born rich and raised sheltered by an alcoholic mother and a ruthless plutocrat father. Though it will later take on a social valence, at this point in the novel her aversion to her heritage is driven by a desire to not have her life run by rich men. This revealed in her bitter thoughts about Jerry Calhoun (who is not yet rich, but under her father’s tutelage will be): “she knew who Jerry Calhoun was. She knew all about him, all right. Oh, Jerry Calhoun was high up in the sky in a plane, and he was looking down on everything in the world like he owned it. But he didn’t own her. Nobody owned her” (5). Sue desperately wants to separate herself from the world of her father and his associates, where she feels devoid of agency, controlled by men and their money. In this way she is a prototype for the part of Jack Burden that is embarrassed by his youth in Burden’s landing and wants to distance himself from it. Warren also revisits this type with Bradwell Tolliver in *Flood*.

For Jerry Calhoun’s part, the *All the King’s Men* equivalent for his childhood is clearly Willie Stark’s. Like Stark, Calhoun comes from modest origins and spent his youth studying hard in his bedroom. Both are examples of the self-made man, though Willie rises higher and has a more legitimate claim to the title. As William Bedford Clark notes, Jerry “would like to think

of himself as a self-made man, but in reality he has bought into a system in which the self is unmade and unmanned” (85). Jerry also has a bit of Percy Munn’s personality, in that he is a man without a sense of history and is especially reticent about his personal past. This is revealed early in the novel when Jerry is talking to the patriarch, Bogan Murdock, and Murdock reminisces about his childhood while playing piano: “[Bogan] began to improvise a slow, sweet, melancholy tune; and Jerry, attending to it, thought of his own boyhood, which, for the moment, seemed precious to him. That was strange, for ordinarily he shut his mind resolutely to any thought of that past” (22). Like Stark, Jerry rose from very humble origins—he is also like Jed Tewksbury of *A Place to Come To* in that respect—and, though he is not without some nostalgia, is anxious to distance himself from that past.¹⁰ Included in that past is not just Jerry’s boyhood, but his years in college as well: “Looking back, Jerry Calhoun did not like to think of anything in those years, not even his triumphs. They too were somehow tainted” (52). The use of the word “tainted” is especially interesting here. It implies that Jerry views the past not as something that would be to his benefit to internalize, but as something that is poisoned and that can further infect the unwary. Further, James Justus notes the conflict between Jerry and his past as a conflict between his duty to his father and surrogate paternal faith in Bogan Murdock:

Jerry Calhoun fantasizes his father’s down-at-heels farm into “the old Calhoun place,” an urbanite’s hideaway from which have been banished all signs of human imperfection [...] Only a counter-vision of confession, where he can admit to his

¹⁰ One might argue that Willie Stark doesn’t wish to distance himself from his past—based on the evidence of his multiple visits to his boyhood home, both during the novel and previous visits that are alluded to—but every tie that Willie Stark maintains to that world is for the benefit of his political career. He arrives for his visits flanked by photographers for pictures in front of the home or in the room where he used to study as a boy. His concerns with that home and life are almost entirely based in the image it projects of the self-made man of the people. The house itself is a perfect microcosm for his focus on image. He makes improvements to his parent’s home, but only in ways that will not be noticeable from the road, lest the neighbors or worse the press start to think he was getting too comfortable with money and power. Jerry Calhoun has no such political necessity driving his representation of his past.

father “I wanted you dead,” can dispel both former contempt for his real father and chagrin at his misplaced faith in the bogus father. (12)

Before that vision, Jerry experiences the trauma of having rejected his own father, and his socio-economic position, for the father that his reason would prefer. As Justus notes, “In denying that responsibility [of his past and human relationships] he also denies the mutual warmth and closeness that could purge his fears” (183). He must live in the conflicted space between his lived experience and the performance he attempts to enact, under constant threat that his past will rise up and hold him to account for effacing it.

Jerry’s tempestuous relationship with his past manifests in various ways, such as when he visits the home of Duckfoot Blake. Sitting in Duckfoot’s home, a modest shack where he lives with his elderly parents, Jerry finds himself assailed by dialectical emotional states:

sometimes, sitting there, Jerry would find himself absorbed into a powerful but nameless security, would feel within himself a certainty and a warmth. Feeling that, he would lie back in his chair, almost drowsily despite the coffee, the sweet taste of the food still in his mouth. Sometimes, but not always, for sometimes, that very same scene, the same high bantering voice, provoked in him a discomfort and revulsion, almost a hatred for these people, who had done nothing to him but who, for the moment, worked upon him like an insult. (79)

He does not acknowledge it himself, but in this moment Jerry is responding to the recursion of his past. Blake’s house reminds him too much of the home he grew up in—of the house that he spent his whole life running from. At times being in Duckfoot’s home lulls Jerry with a peaceful nostalgia, though he’s not aware of anything beyond its physical manifestation as a sense of “a certainty and a warmth.” In other moments he is assaulted by the ghost of his unclaimed identity.

Overwhelmed by a recursion of the past he tried to run from, though he again is only aware of the feeling, Jerry is sickened by his surroundings.

In moments like this, Jerry reveals a central facet of unclaimed identity, which is not so clearly displayed by either Jack Burden or Percy Munn. Although much of what I have discussed as the traumatic material of unclaimed identity could fall under the broad heading of white Southern guilt, Jerry's trauma is less due to a history of concentrated power or racial abuse, though he is by no means without complicity in those wrongs. Rather, his trauma seems to stem largely from embarrassment over his meager upbringing. Though this trauma often deals with larger historical factors, especially in Warren's fiction, Jerry's seems to be more pedestrian than Jack Burdens. Still, an argument could be made that there is a socio-historical dimension here as Jerry's anxiety seems to stem from a desire to distance himself from Poor White cultural connotations.¹¹ If unclaimed identity is the experience of one who is unprepared to accept one's experiential identity in the moment, then what part of the material of identity could be more unprepared for than that which one is born into? Just as Jack Burden must process the latent trauma of Cass Mastern's transgression, a trespass that occurred long before his birth, Jerry Calhoun must process this trauma—not founded upon sin, but of being born into a life that did not fit the story his reason had made to suit his aspirations.

Sue Murdock is drawn to Jerry Calhoun because he represents something of an enigma to her. At one point, "after she had known Jerry Calhoun some two years, but before she was in love with him" (49), Sue goes to the public library to look up old articles about him in his college football days, when he was known as Bulls-eye Calhoun. She does this not to learn about Jerry as a football player, but as the man himself. She thinks, "he wasn't like any of the others she

¹¹ Warren would also explore this aspect of traumatic identity with Monty Harrick in *The Cave*, and his conflicted relation to "hillbilly" identity.

knew, not like Dan Morton or any of them. Oh, she knew them, all right, she knew them all. But she did not know Jerry Calhoun” (50). The roots of this attraction are similar to those of Percy Munn and Lucille Christian, discussed above: the recognition of a mutual inner mystery. Neither Sue nor Jerry have a firm grip on their personal identity. Add to this Sue’s recognition of the inner mystery in Jerry and the attraction is formed. Sue sees that Jerry Calhoun is different from the men she knows and she constructs his mystery as an unassailable Othered difference, but a difference that tantalizes with its promise of knowledge outside her sheltered experience. She thinks of Jerry as carrying “marks of the world” that are strange and unfamiliar to her:

For a long time she tried to interpret those marks, to understand what life and meaning, what patience and strength and fortitude lay behind them, but she did not have a key for the hieroglyphics. Gerald Calhoun could not tell her what they meant, even though she asked him, for he had forgotten their true meaning or had put it from his mind. Then, after a while, the marks themselves were worn away, smoothed out by the daily abrasions of the world she knew, the world of Dan Morton and her brother Ham and all the other young men like them, the world of her father. (59)

Sue sees in Jerry a chance to move beyond her narrow experience. He presents this possibility because he came from a different world to join hers—he wasn’t born to it. She imagines that coming to know Jerry would give her some knowledge of life outside her experience, which would then cycle back to give her knowledge of herself. But in this moment we see already that their relationship will fail to provide that which she looks for. Justus writes, “Sue’s strategies are more desperate than her lover’s: having rejected an unsatisfactory definition of herself, she is

still searching for a satisfactory one” (185)¹². Jerry came from a world outside, but he has joined her father’s world, and every day would become more and more like one of them. Sue craves an escape from that world to discover herself, and she cannot do so with Jerry.

In later scenes, Jerry considers their mutual inscrutability as well. Their first sexual encounter occurs on the carpet of Bogan Murdock’s library, while the rest of the family was elsewhere in the house. As with Cass Mastern’s tryst with Anabelle Trice, there is a clear insouciance in this union and that becomes a site of trauma for Jerry Calhoun. He does not act out of logical consideration or even from a place of confident rejection of logic, but is driven by carnal instinct. Yet it is not the carnality, nor is it the sexual act, that Jerry is unprepared for. Rather, he took his own illogical act as an affront. It suggests a lack of the self-control and mastery that Jerry had spent his spartan childhood trying to develop and makes him unknowable to himself:

almost every time when the recollection of that night in the library came back to him, he would think, *my God, suppose somebody had come, suppose Bogan Murdock had come!* She must have been crazy. And he must have been. He couldn’t understand her, not a damned thing about her. And he couldn’t understand himself. (95)

He thinks about this theme again when discussing Sue with her father, Bogan. Bogan tells Jerry that he is better for Sue than her liberal friends from the university, because Jerry understands her. Jerry is not so sure: “Understand her? Maybe not yet, Jerry thought” (110). Yet Jerry is

¹² In this vein, the general crux of Justus’ dismissive criticism of Sue’s search for identity is that she does so in the “phony world of the university and the little theater” (185). I would argue however that her retreat into this world is preceded by the realization of the inadequacy of the world her father and Jerry occupied—which could by no means be defended as any more authentic—and that it was influenced by external actors, most notably the new controlling influence of Slim Sarrett. Crucially, this is a world that Sue will also distance herself from when she begins to chafe under Sarrett’s presence.

optimistic that in time he will come to understand her: “Not yet, but there would be time. And he could wait” (110). But he won’t get the chance to wait and learn, because their relationship ends long before Jerry could come to understand Sue Murdock.

The moment that their relationship ends is another site of trauma for Jerry because Jerry is not prepared for it, and therefore the material it suggests about his identity goes unclaimed. The time leading up to their separation was a happy time for Jerry: “Everything seemed so sure during those weeks [...] That was the reason why he was so *unprepared and undefended* when it happened, and why he could find no reason” (133 emphasis mine). Sue actually leaves Jerry when he is defending her grandfather, Major Murdock, for having murdered Judge Goodpasture years earlier. At this moment Jerry is speaking to a part of Sue’s unclaimed identity. As with the history of Cass Mastern in the life of Jack Burden, this moment is a part of Sue’s identity through blood. It is part of her heritage, though the transgression occurred years before she was born. Of course the integration of this moment depends upon Sue’s acceptance of complicity, but she rails against it instead.

The murder is a perfect microcosm of all the corruptions of money and power that Sue sees in her father’s world. It was committed over a social concept of honor, and the Major escaped severe punishment largely because of his political position. The situation is only complicated by the fact that her father has used his backroom influence to get a park named after the dying Major. Sue is rightly disgusted that Bogan can buy back his father’s dignity and legacy. Her distaste for the whole situation is revealed in the comment she makes to set off Jerry’s response. Hugh Spiller says that it is “mighty nice” that a park in the mountains was being named for her grandfather. Sue’s response is cagey, more so as they continue to press her and ask if she and her grandfather are “thrilled.” Finally, Sue cannot take their questions and

says, “I know. When you’ve shot somebody and they name a park after you. It must be thrilling” (134).

The nameless man whose questioning inspired the outburst tries to backpedal, but Jerry interrupts him, offering his opinion despite the fact that none asked for it and that his opinion is a clear refutation of what Sue, his supposed partner, would say. He “affirmed” his opinion and looks at the group to call their attention while “straightening himself in his chair” (134). Now the center of attention, Jerry offers the tired Old South line—that the Major is somehow excused for his actions because the killing was a matter of honor among gentlemen. Having had her opinion about her own grandfather marginalized by Jerry, Sue simply rises from the table and leaves. In some ways this simple act of withdrawal displays more genuine agency on Sue’s part than in the entire novel up until this point, which explains why she is so lost upon leaving.

At Heaven’s Gate self-consciously foregrounds identity production more blatantly than perhaps any other novel by Warren. This is largely due to Slim Sarrett, whose mediations on identity—and a number of other subjects—closely mirror Warren’s own. As a poet, Sarrett closely studies his friends and acquaintances, and his attentive ear often causes them to divulge more than they had planned about their personal lives. Sue Murdock notices this in an early scene and comments on the “tricks” Sarrett uses to make people talk about themselves. He responds, “I don’t make them [...] I simply give them the opportunity. Which is what they want. But they don’t talk about themselves out of vanity. Oh, no. It is because they are mysterious to themselves, and they talk just to find out something about the mystery” (27). In a sense, Sarrett is speaking to the core of unclaimed identity, and that would make the “opportunity” he claims to provide akin to facilitating the process of working through traumatic material.

When Sue calls Slim after leaving Jerry at the dance, he presumes to see through her attempts at self-realization. He tells her a pedantic story about a girl who did not enjoy sex, but who “constantly practiced the act” because she enjoyed observing her sexual partners (148). Sue says he makes her sick, causing Slim to turn this back toward Sue, suggesting that her “ambivalence” toward him stems from her own inner confusion (149), and further that she is not reacting to Slim’s personality but to the “facts or ideas” that he presents her with. These facts are “in the world. Which I [Slim] hasten to state, I did not create. I did not create the girl I mentioned or initiate her career of debauching infants” (150). Sue is perceptive enough to notice that, as we will later learn about Slim’s own backstory, he “made up every damned word about it [...] About that girl” (150). Conversation then turns to Sue’s reasons for leaving Jerry. She describes her act as stemming from the same insouciance that led Jerry into the relationship in the first place: “‘It just came over me all at once,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t like deciding anything, thinking about it, you know. I just got up and walked out’ (151). She says that she expected everything to work out between them, she could picture them married and happy, but Slim sees this for what it is: “You don’t understand yourself, and therefore you have to make up a version you do understand. A simplified, conventionalized version with a little best-seller plot and a happy ending. It is a common situation” (152). And, as solution to this common state of affairs, Slim proposes “that she had to learn never to make up a picture of herself, never, never, to do that, but to be what she was, that it was hard to do but she had to do it” (155). Of course, Slim cheapens this insight by immediately proceeding to tell Sue the made up story of his boyhood in Louisiana, but that fact does not invalidate his insight. Richard G. Law notes, “Warren’s practice of putting his own notions in the mouths of his least sympathetic characters [...] For instance, Warren casts Slim Sarrett, who is a pathological liar, poseur, and murderer, as a New Critic” (93). Slim is a deeply

flawed character, but ironically he is the one that comes closest to expressing Warren's views. Blotner goes so far as to suggest that Slim's close parallels to Warren's own experience make him a sort of Mr. Hyde to the author's Dr. Jekyll (207).

Slim's insight into the subject arises again in an academically instructive, yet dramatically torpid, scene as Slim works on a paper for his Shakespeare seminar. The "theme" of Shakespeare's plays is, Sarrett argues, "the necessity for self-knowledge" (196). Law notes that Slim's writing here embodies the tenants of New Criticism (23), and James Justus notes the reflections of Warren's own writing in his essay on "Pure and Impure Poetry" (127). Slim writes:

Macbeth comes to ruin, not because he kills [...] but because he does not realize upon what grounds it is possible for him, Macbeth, to kill. Bacon wrote:

Knowledge is power. Bacon was thinking of knowledge of the mechanisms of the external world. Shakespeare wrote: Self-knowledge is power [...] In other words, Shakespeare was interested in success. By success, he meant: Self-fulfillment.

(196)

Though this passage is presented as Sarrett writing about Shakespeare, it could just as easily be Warren writing about self-knowledge in his own novels. Slim arrives at this conclusion analytically, but, crucially, Sue had already arrived at that same knowledge, experientially.

When Slim reads a part of his paper to Sue and asks her opinion, she begins to process that material. She presents the self-knowledge in Shakespeare as something that occurs through an organic, even traumatic, epiphanic moment. Discussing her portrayal of Cordelia, she says:

Oh, it wasn't exactly like anything you can say. At first, it wasn't anything, when I began to read it and study it and rehearse it [...] Then it was different. I just knew it was different, all of a sudden, one night rehearsing, right there on the

stage. I was saying: 'what shall Cordelia do? / Love, and be silent.' Standing there, and then it was different, all at once. It was different from then on. (197)

She is not talking about Cordelia's self-knowledge, but her own. The Shakespearian text acts as a catalyst to facilitate this encounter with Sue's experience and identity. She has not yet processed the unclaimed material stemming from this encounter, though through its recursion in this conversation she is beginning to, but the correspondence to her own life is clear. The lines from Lear, "what shall Cordelia do? / Love, and be silent," are a perfect metaphor for Sue's own experience of repression and marginalization. Her unclaimed identity is in part similar to that of Jack Burden or Bradwell Tolliver, the guilt of Southern whiteness and her privileged upbringing, but it is also constituted of the identity that her father and his wealthy associates have denied her. This traumatic moment, after which "it was different," is Sue's first realization of another crucial aspect of unclaimed identity: it is not enough simply to accept complicity. Though the traumatic encounter is happened upon with insouciance, one must make a conscious effort to claim that identity to successfully process it. This is akin to the sentiment bell hooks cites concerning the postmodern dismissal of essentialism in "Postmodern Blackness," "yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you got one" (hooks). Though hooks ultimately seeks to defend the anti-essentialism of postmodern theory, this idea has its basis in experience. When one has had one's identity suppressed or denied, it is all the more imperative that he or she reach out to claim that identity. Thus, for Sue to process her unclaimed identity requires a conscious effort on her part, the first step of which she undertook when she walked out on Jerry and her father.

And yet that step does not immediately lead to self-knowledge. Though she began the process, she finds her identity is again suppressed by masculine authority. Here, rather than the influence of her father and his money, the oppressive force is Sarrett and the pseudo-intellectual

studio world that creates: “Slim Sarrett had created that world, he was, somehow detached from it, and was above it” (243). Having exited her life of luxury and begun slumming it on her own, Sue starts to display the same aversion to her own past that Jerry displayed earlier: “She rarely thought of her own past, of how she came to be where she was. The way things were now was good enough; at least, for now” (242). With her escape from her father, Sue allows herself to be deluded into believing she was somehow vindicated, separated from the world of her origins, but Sweetwater, the Marxist labor organizer, forces her to confront her own hypocrisy. When Alice Smythe exalts Sue as an example of courage to counteract the evil actions of her father, Sweetwater asks “and how does she live?” (245). Sue lives on the money she inherited from her grandmother, which she sees as somehow cleaner than accepting financial help from her father. In reality the difference is not so pronounced, as Sweetwater says, “It comes [...] from the same place where that kind of money always comes from. It don’t make any difference how much it is—lots or little. It’s the same thing” (245). Sweetwater would later expand upon these sentiments in thought: “It didn’t take much courage to just play at being poor, if you had enough dough to finance the project of playing at being poor” (295). This moment is another recursion of the trauma of Sue’s origins, and despite its antagonism is probably also the first clear sign that Sue will end up romantically involved with Sweetwater. Like Sarrett, and like Jerry before, Sweetwater has made her realize something about herself and Sue is drawn to the recognition of the “direction of fulfillment,” to use Warren’s term, that she sees in him.

The end of Sue’s relationship with Slim occurs in the explosive moment when Billie Constantidopeles appears and reveals the lie that is the entire story of Slim’s life that he told her. From her response it is clear that she sees the moment as a return to a state of freedom from male authority, similar to that which she experienced briefly after setting out on her own. Rather than

being hurt by the revealed falsehood, she is almost happy about it: “*The little liar, the little stinking liar*, she said to herself, but the words were automatic in her mind, and if she was angry, the anger was absorbed into a pervasive and delightful excitement, a sense of freedom and power, a tingling exaltation” (256). This is a moment of freedom for Sue, dark as it is, but it is also problematic. Slim’s revealed lie is that he was actually, much like Sue, raised by wealthy parents and was merely pretending that he was one of the common folk born into poverty. In her moment of freedom, Sue does not see herself in Slim’s lie. She does not see, in spite of Sweetwater’s earlier presentation of the issue, that her situation of pretending to have cut herself off completely from her father’s world while still living so close and using money from her grandmother is not all that different from what Slim had done.

At the opening of Chapter Twenty-two, Sweetwater tells Sue a story that he heard many times from his father. The story tells how, as a young soldier, Sweetwater’s father was wounded and how General Lee himself visited his bed in a field hospital during the night. Sweetwater’s preacher father would tell the story with reverence and at every opportunity. When Sue observes that it isn’t a bad story, Sweetwater responds: “There’s not a God-damned thing wrong with the story, except [...] it’s a lie. There ain’t anything wrong with any story I ever heard except it was a God-damned lie. They’re all God-damned lies, which is what makes ‘em stories” (286). Sweetwater is expressing an almost postmodern sentiment here, that the stories we tell to define our identity—which is how his father used this story—are all ultimately lies, designed to cover an absence. Yet where Sweetwater differs from that point of view is that he does not assert that there is no truth, just that the truth cannot be expressed linguistically. Regardless, he is a man that clearly values the possibility of truth. This story also reveals that, other than Major Murdock, Sweetwater is the character in the novel who has the clearest emersion in the Southern past, and

who also responds with the strongest rejection of it. He says: “When I put on long pants, I said I was through. I’d had a bellyful of the Lost Cause, and believe in winning a fight if I get into one” (287). Sweetwater goes on to tell his life story after leaving his father, not acknowledging that, by his own estimation, the story was necessarily “a God-damned lie.” There is a suggestion that Sweetwater makes some progression toward reconciling with his father and the past, though it does not amount to a full enactment of Warren’s recognitions leading to selfhood.

Sweetwater’s most important role is not what he represents as a man who has achieved or is approaching selfhood, but what he offers to Sue’s progress toward that recognition. Like Sarrett, Sweetwater sees through Sue to a portion of her struggle. He sees that she is searching, but still expressing herself through borrowed words and ideas:

What she said didn’t matter, anyway. It was just a lie somebody put in her mouth.

Her face was trying to tell the truth, but she didn’t have the words for it. Maybe she would never find the words for it [...] *Sister*, he would think then, feeling sorry for her, *sister, you got plenty way to go yet*.

Thinking that—*you got plenty way to go yet*—speaking from the distance of the way he himself had come. (296)

Sue has a long way to go, but she has also come a long way from the girl on her father’s ranch in the opening scene of the novel. She has, little by little, come to find freedom. Each of the male characters functions as a facilitating Other for Sue, she recognizes in each of them a portion of her own selfhood. With Jerry she recognized a kindred lack of understanding, Slim showed her to not to make up stories about herself but to find identity through experience, and Sweetwater makes her consider her continuing ties to her father and that world—a lesson that could

eventually lead to an acceptance of complicity instead of continuing to deceive herself and hide from her past.

Even while she is alone with Sweetwater, Sue continues to fixate on the lesson of Slim's falsehood, just as with Slim she had to process what she learned from Jerry. Each relationship adds traumatic material to her unclaimed identity, and in the aftermath of each she works to process that material. She asks Sweetwater why Slim would have told her a lie about his childhood. Sweetwater takes a pragmatic view: "Maybe he told you because he wanted you to feel sorry for him. Or think he was wonderful or something. But the real reason was because he was a liar" (303). But Sue is not able to move past the lie, finally admitting that she would like to kill Slim. When she says this, Sweetwater thinks:

She would like to kill him. Because he had something on her. Because he had a secret. She would like to kill him like you want to kill somebody who blackmails you. He was a part of her now. He was the part of her she wanted to kill. She wouldn't feel clean till he was dead. (304)

The part of Sue that Slim "was" is the same part of her that he always warned her against—the part that wants nothing more than to make up stories about herself and hide from her past. Her hatred of him comes from betrayal, but not the conventional betrayal of the jilted lover. Rather, she was betrayed by Slim as a teacher who tried to teach her a lesson while behaving in the exact opposite manner himself. Slim's hypocrisy exposes her own, and she wants to destroy it rather than face it. She has, in Sweetwater's words, "plenty way to go" to her recognition of complicity.

Like Slim, Sweetwater also plays the dual role of instructor and negative example. For all he tries to teach Sue, he does not embody those lessons himself. He focuses on the necessity of having beliefs and something to stand on, which he does do, but in terms of the broader lessons

he tries to teach her, the lessons that correspond to Warren's recognitions, he is a less than stellar exemplar. His shrewd attention to the economic realities of Sue's life, discussed above, suggest the necessity of complicity and personal responsibility, but his own history contradicts his lesson. After discussing Slim's lies, Sue goes on to tell Sweetwater about a traumatic moment from earlier in the novel, her insouciant betrayal of her friend Rosemary by having sex with Jerry on the girl's bed and later taunting her with the knowledge. In response, Sweetwater casually tells her the story of the time he hit and robbed "a mulatto whore in Galveston" (307). He tells her to simply forget about her betrayal of Rosemary as he forgot about what he did to the woman in Galveston: "Do something and it'll be all right. You'll forget it then. And then it won't matter if you do remember it" (307). This is a complete rejection of the philosophy of personal responsibility he talks about elsewhere. Sweetwater is a man who stands for something, economic and class equality, but his single-minded devotion to that cause leads him to forget personal responsibility in other aspects of his life. His role is to teach Sue about complicity, but it is not a lesson that he himself has mastered, just as Slim had not been able to live without making up stories about himself. In this scene, he also embodies the negation of another of Warren's recognitions: the death of the self. Despite his claim to be a champion of the common man in unionization fights, Sweetwater represents the enshrinement of personal ego. After telling Sue to simply forget her past transgressions, Sweetwater has this almost comically self-aggrandizing series of thoughts:

Sweetie, he said to himself, his hand lying on her hair, you are a wonderful guy.

You are not a mess. You are superb. You are Socrates. You are Bruce Barton. You are the Child Jesus expounding the law in the Temple. You are Dorothy Dix. You

take away the sins of the world. And your personality is so God-damned fascinating. (307)

Sweetwater's ego is to a large extent what makes him so problematic. His refusal to compromise with Sue and controlling behavior that destroys the relationship are driven by his fanatical devotion to himself and his ideals. As Sue—bitter, pregnant, and very drunk—accuses: “you want to run everybody for their own good, and you don't give a damn for anybody, not anybody in the world, just yourself, just yourself!” (320). Richard G. Law argues that whereas Slim Sarrett is an unsympathetic character who expresses Warren's ideas, Sweetwater is a largely sympathetic character, “in spite of his political views” (94), but, as these passages show, each character expresses a part of Warren's philosophy, while also being deeply flawed. This allows the philosophy to coalesce in Sue, who gains recognition of its constituent parts from the flawed men she has relationships with.

Sue's pregnancy—or, more precisely, Sweetwater's reaction to the pregnancy—is a moment of schism that cuts her off from the selfhood she has been approaching through the novel. When she first announces the pregnancy, both are joyful, with Sweetwater wanting to celebrate with “a two-pound, two-inch-thick Kansas City steak,” but Sue turns the conversation to marriage, which she expects as the only right and natural response to her condition (311). Sweetwater says that he cannot: “He was sorry he could not marry her. But he could not. Not and be Sweetie Sweetwater, who had earned what little he believed in” (312). From this moment their relationship begins to break down.

The culmination of Sue's life, relationships, and understanding of selfhood, takes place in a single tragic scene. Overcome by Sweetwater's controlling personality and refusal to compromise on marriage, Sue decides to abort the pregnancy. She approaches the act much like

her depressed mother approached her withdrawal from life earlier in the novel. Sue eats a small meal, dresses and grooms herself, has a drink of whiskey, and prepares her nightclothes and bed “as though it were evening,” at two-thirty in the afternoon (356). The abortion scene is narrated in a time-bending stream of consciousness, reminiscent of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*¹³, as Sue appears to be in a semi-hallucinatory state from the abortion drug, the whiskey, and/or the pain she is in. Mixed with the present moment are Sue’s memories from a time in her childhood when she was put to bed but snuck out to look for something that was missing. The object she is looking for is neither clear nor important, it is some shiny trinket valuable only to her childish imagination. She remembers the feeling of isolation in her room while other activities take place throughout the house and hiding in the bushes while her father called for her to come back inside. These memories encapsulate the feelings of alienation and oppression that Sue has felt throughout the novel. They also suggest that, even in this moment, all is not lost for Sue. She is finally actively processing the material of her childhood and perhaps even approaching selfhood.

Tragically, that progression is interrupted by two acts of male control. First, a letter from her father is slipped under the door of the apartment. In the letter, Bogan begs Sue to go to somewhere like New York and start over, living on his money rather than continuing to draw on the principle of the money from her grandmother. Sue, seeing this as an attempt by her father to regain financial control over her, crumples the letter without reading to the end, and suddenly the tone of the scene changes—where it had been somber and dreamlike it becomes angry and nightmarish. Bitterly, Sue “began to laugh, and kicked the wad of paper on the floor” (359). She returns to the bed and her memories, but soon passes out.

¹³ James Justus notes that in *At Heaven’s Gate*, most of Warren’s “self-conscious stylistic effects are obviously derivative” and that “The derivation is mostly from Faulkner” (179).

When she comes to, Slim is in the room with her, having let himself in to the apartment. Slim is aroused to find her in that state, as he doesn't yet know in the dark what has happened. He speaks gently and begins to caress her, recalling the predatory nights when he, sober, would watch Sue drink in his studio until she was too drunk to resist as raped her. Here, when his caresses begin, she knows he cannot take advantage of her like he used to: "'I'm drunk like I used to be, but you can't this time, because—'" and it struck her as the funniest thing in the world" (361). She laughs "delightedly, like a child"¹⁴ and sighs contentedly, even as Slim lays his hand on her throat to strangle her (361). In this desperate act she has unexpectedly found freedom from the control of three of the men whose influence served as both catalyst and hindrance to her recognitions of selfhood. She has defied Sweetwater, who would have had her live as his unmarried mistress and mother of his child, her father, whose financial help she has denied once and for all, and Slim, who she has finally found a way to physically deny even in her inebriated state. Sue struggles against each of the men in her life and takes some knowledge of selfhood from each relationship, but the inequality of those relationships prevents her from attaining selfhood. Essentially, Sue's disenfranchisement prevents her from processing her unclaimed identity, despite numerous recursions and chances to do that work, because each time she begins that process she finds herself under a new source of male control. Here, in her final moments, Sue is able to finally break from each guise of that control. Even when Slim strangles her she does not fight back, actively allowing her murder rather than giving him the satisfaction of defeating her. Though she dies without having processed the traumatic material of her past,

¹⁴ I should note also the connection to the reference to childhood at the moment of Percy Munn's death in *Night Rider*. In both instances there are strong connections to childhood in the final moments of both of these characters who fail to obtain selfhood, as if to imply that they are childlike in their fractured and unclaimed identities, not having reached the maturity of selfhood.

without recognizing selfhood, Sue does find a measure of freedom with her final act—a tragic victory.

Strangely, in the final pages of the novel the character that emerges as perhaps the clearest exemplar is a character that I have mentioned very little in this discussion thus far: Duckfoot Blake¹⁵. Blake is a fairly minor character, but an important one in that he expresses a genuine confidence throughout the novel. Whereas the three male characters that Sue has relationships with each use their confidence to mask some insecurity or lack, Blake's confidence always seems genuine and grounded. After Sue's death, when Duckfoot and Jerry are talking in the jailhouse, he reveals the source of that confidence—Duckfoot Blake is the only character in *At Heaven's Gate* with a clear sense of complicity. A mob has gathered outside to hang Anse, the Murdock's young black servant, who has been blamed for Sue's murder—a clear reflection of the hanging in *Night Rider*—and Blake is getting impatient that they've gathered in the street but don't get it over with. Jerry says that it doesn't matter, and Blake yells that it does, everything does:

He knew that it mattered. Duckfoot Blake knew that everything mattered. He knew that everything he had ever done or said or thought mattered. He knew that all those years which had been full of his goings and comings and all his loneliness and his pride and his pitiful pleasures mattered. He had never known it before, but he knew it now. He knew it, at last, and all the years he had lived were

¹⁵ I also admit to neglecting Ashby Wyndham, the protagonist of his own counterpointal narrative. Justus notes that the confessional nature of Wyndham's "Statement" ties him to "the Mariner" theme in that he must confess the "albatross" of his sins (25). Wyndham does not achieve selfhood, partly because of his development of righteous pride as a man of God, but he does come closer to it than most in the novel. He is, as Justus notes (190), an anticipation of Cass Mastern in *All the King's Men*, and has his own formulation of the web: the image of ripples running out from a rock thrown into a pond.

there all at once in him and around him, and that was horrible, more horrible than the thing which was about to happen. (373)

It lacks the dark stylization of Burden's web, or the populist poetry of Munn's strings stretching from person to person, but in some ways Blake's recognition of complicity is the clearest and most direct expression of complicity in Warren's first three novels.

In *At Heaven's Gate* Warren creates a character, in Sue, that moves toward selfhood but is hindered from reaching it, and he also creates Duckfoot Blake, who has this vision of complicity, elegant in its simplicity. Through his first two novels he establishes these various tropes—defining a progression through which a character could process his or her unclaimed identity, realize the central recognitions, and begin to approach selfhood. The achievement of *All the King's Men* is that he is finally able to make these aspects coalesce in Jack Burden, a central character who struggles and is ultimately successful in his quest for selfhood.

6. *The Cave* (1959)

Critical responses to *The Cave*, Warren's sixth novel, have often focused on its place amongst Warren's later fiction as an experimental text without a clear protagonist. It is common for critics to ascribe a sharp divide to the novels after *All the King's Men*, such that at times it seems that Warren's career as a novelist consisted of two apprentice novels, working up to the third, and a downward spiral of lesser fictions from there. James Justus writes in *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, "In terms of our conventional expectations, the latter fiction suffers as its world grows less political: the vastly distributed personal urgencies of *The Cave*, the fablistic moral progress of one man in *Wilderness*, the clash of jarring aesthetics in *Flood* [...] they are thin" (162). Further, he states, "The widely ranged voices we hear in *At Heaven's Gate* and *All the King's Men* come in the later fiction to be absorbed by a presiding consciousness [...] The result is a prose that is less narrative than it is meditative" (268-9). This absorbing consciousness spreads the drama of trauma and unclaimed identity across the entire narrative. Thus, I could suggest that in *The Cave* there are individual expressions of trauma, but the overall point of frisson is the communal trauma of Jasper's disappearance into the void. The process of working through cannot be assigned to an individual character, but rather the communal expression of this "presiding consciousness." As Justus writes, the novel "has no real protagonist and no authoritative point of view; themes and patterns of action, familiar from earlier novels, fall to several characters, each of which is allowed independent ethical positions and devices for 'telling'" (33). Yet such a reading places too much focus on the on the communal reaction to Jasper's absence and risks missing the centrality of another character, Jack Harrick, whose simultaneous presence and absence informs most of the essential moments in the text.

Another commonality in previous critical treatments has been the tendency to refer to Jasper, trapped in the cave to only be revealed through memory and the words of others, as the central point around which a cast of equal-billing develops their own identities. According to Randolph Runyon, Jasper is "the absent center around which the plot unfolds" (45). Justus goes further, to state that Jasper is a "noncharacter" who "is metaphorical, archetypal, mythical, bigger-than-life, even stereotypical; and it is against him that 'real' people test the validity of their own more fragmented searches for self-definition" (275). These readings are also limited, in that they see the ordering absence of Jasper, but not that this present absence is masking another absence: the myth of the "hillbilly heller" Jack Harrick, which is, in itself, a creation of the community that now attempts to "test" their identities against the myth. A notable exception to the critical focus on Jasper is H.R. Stoneback, who notes the centrality of Jack's myth as embodied in the opening vignette: "Jack Harrick's guitar is the core image and central symbol, the gathering point where most of the novel's meanings converge and from which resolutions resonate" (14). The guitar is a symbol of the myth and its continuing resonance—unchanged, unlike Jack himself—is a tangible incursion of that mythic past.

The Cave opens with an allegorical and almost romantic vignette of Jack Harrick's guitar leaning against Jasper Harrick's boots in the clearing outside the cave where Jasper is, at this point unbeknownst to any but himself, trapped. The narrative voice is ornamented, musical, almost purple, and the prologue works to introduce "core image." Justus writes on the diverse "stylization" of the novel in general, and of this scene in particular he writes: "a persona hovers over the scene at the cave like an indulgent Keats" (267). This "indulgent Keats" revels in the sounds and sights of the glade—the sunlight, the bird and locust sounds, the boots, and the guitar. The first image is of Jasper's boots, introduced through their marketing copy in the

“Monkey-Ward” catalogue and then through their well-worn and tended career in Jasper’s hands and on his feet. The boots have taken on life through this treatment, a history that suggests Jasper’s self-understanding: “boots, bearing the mark of their master’s weight, strength, and strain, like a body when the soul is withdrawn in sleep, or death” (4). These boots will later be contrasted with Monty’s boots that, though the same model from the same catalogue, do not carry “the mark of their master’s weight,” but here Jasper’s weight on the boots is contrasted with a greater and more present weight, “the weight of the guitar propped over” the boots (4).

With the entrance of the guitar the “indulgent Keats” comes into its own. The sunlight is described as glittering off the guitar and strings like sound, and as making sound: “when the ray of sunlight strikes the glitter off the guitar strings, you hear it like a big *whang*” (5). The guitar is, as discussed above, the key image of the novel and points to its central absence of the text. Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher focus on the boots and the absence of Jasper: “The first paragraph of the *The Cave*, which describes a pair of boots, concludes with a sentence which highlights Jasper's absence in the novel in spatial terms: ‘But the man was not there’” (1). Moving beyond that first paragraph, the introduction of the guitar with “the mother-of-pearl [...] letters set in the pale-polished wood. JACK HARRICK / HIS BOX / 1901” (5), also introduces the much more important absence of Jack Harrick. Warren continues, “Jack Harrick, whoever he is, is not here in the beautiful glade ... For Jack Harrick, a big, grizzled, heavy-headed old man, ruined and beautiful, is two and one-half miles away, sitting in a wheel chair, dying of cancer” (5). According to Stoneback, this moment “announces the novel’s deep structure” (14-15). While Jasper’s disappearance into the cave is the more immediate and obvious absence, the absence of the mother-of-pearl mythic Jack Harrick is the defining absence for himself, his sons, and his community. The absence is emphasized in the description of the living Harrick as a bitter, dying

man who “is wondering if he smells” and who is addressed by his wife as “John T.—dear John T.” rather than the massive name that adorns his guitar and reflects the myth.

The mother-of-pearl letters are a matter of interest in their own right. Some critics have interpreted the letters as a sign of Jack’s personal vanity. Stoneback addresses Barnett Guttenberg, who describes Jack Harrick’s guitar as carrying an “arrogant inscription,” but Stoneback counters: “Only someone who has never really played a guitar, never lived a lifetime writing identity on the glittering strings of light-made-sound could consider the bardic personalization of a guitar an arrogant inscription” (15). Yet, putting aside Jack’s motivation for inlaying his name, the sheer anachronism of those letters is their more thematically relevant aspect. Of course, the idea that Warren is alluding to here is a common country trope—ornate guitars, glittering suits and sleek Cadillac’s (which Warren also represents through Nick Pappy’s yellow “Cad”)—that Deke Dickerson has referred to as “hillbilly flash.”¹⁶ It is well known that country music artists often decorate the fretboards of custom made guitars with their names. Warren surely has in mind a guitar like Jimmie Rodgers 1927 Martin 000-45 with the name Jimmie Rodgers between the frets and Rodgers’ nickname “Blue Yodel” in the shape of a T on the headstock. Yet comparing this guitar to the one Warren describes presents some immediate problems. First, the shape of the inlay as presented in the novel is problematic:

JACK HARRICK

HIS BOX

1901

Simply put, this inlay could not physically fit on the long, narrow shape of a guitar fretboard. One could suggest that the arrangement might be something like Rodgers’ guitar, with the name Jack Harrick on the fret board and “His Box 1901” arranged on the headstock, but there is no

¹⁶ *The Strat in the Attic 2: More Thrilling Stories of Guitar Archaeology*. Voyageur Press, 2014, p 128.

internal evidence for this reading and Warren's language itself seems to dispel the possibility. Taking the shape as represented in the novel the only available "pale-polished wood" for it to be "set in" would be the spruce on the face of the instrument. This is questionable in itself, because while inlaid fretboards are quite common amongst country musicians, inlays on the body of the guitar tend to be more for decoration than communication—there is a tradition among American folk musicians to write messages on their guitars, most notably Woody Guthrie's "This Machine Kills Fascists," but these messages are usually written rather than inlaid. Furthermore, the year 1901 is also problematic. Jimmie Rodgers is widely acknowledged to be the father of modern country music and the first to achieve large scale success singing what had been previously thought of as regional "hillbilly" music. As such, his 1927 Martin is also acknowledged as the first guitar to bear the performer's name.¹⁷ Indeed this makes sense as no performer before Rodgers would have had the kind of encompassing stardom to justify such a display. Thus for Warren to suggest that Harrick, a performer that had no more than regional fame, would have inlaid his guitar in such a manner nearly three decades before suggests a certain penchant for anachronism that informs much of the novel.¹⁸

In his introduction to the 1996 reprint of *The Cave*, James Justus writes of "the sense of a slight temporal dislocation that lends the entire book a pervasive retrospective atmosphere. Internal dating fixes the present action no earlier than 1954, yet Warren's descriptions consistently predate this period" (xii). I would not suggest that Warren is working with an intentional historical irreverence as in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, but that *The Cave* is comprised

¹⁷ I have been unable to find any earlier references to the practice either among hillbilly/country or vaudeville/minstrel performers. Instrument customization was not widely practiced in the earlier American vaudeville tradition.

¹⁸ It is also worth noting that while Warren's description calls to mind Rodgers' custom 000-45 guitar or even the larger customized dreadnaught guitars commonly played by country artists in the 1950's, those models did not yet exist in 1901. Harrick's guitar would rather have been a smaller 00 guitar, commonly called a parlor guitar for its small size and moderate volume, appropriate for playing in the parlor of a home. It would not necessarily be the ideal instrument for a "hillbilly heller" to have adorned with "hillbilly flash."

of an inherently anachronistic structure. Jack's guitar is a perfect example of this structural anachronism. As I have explained above, the guitar most resembles a trend that began with Jimmie Rodgers in 1927, but is anachronistically labeled 1901 and we are seeing the guitar in the present day of the mid 1950's (around the time Warren began conceptualizing *The Cave*). The explanation for these three varying dates is structural—Warren's intended plot structure did not line up with the thematic core of the novel. The core of the novel is in the 1920's—Jimmie Rodgers came into his fame in 1927 and more importantly, as I will discuss below, Floyd Collins died in Sand Cave and Vernon Dalhart recorded "The Death of Floyd Collins" in 1925—but Warren wanted the novel to focus on Jack Harrick's son, not the man himself (fathers and sons being one of Warren's recurrent themes). This means that he could not set the novel in the 20s, so he chose a more contemporary setting.¹⁹ Warren could have conceivably set the novel in 1954 with Jack Harrick having risen to musical fame in the late 1920s and Jasper could be the correct age to be a Korean War veteran, but he was also structurally limited by his decision to make Jack considerably older than his wife, Celia, at the time of their marriage. Jack could not find musical acclaim in the 1920's and marry Celia early enough for Jasper to enlist for the war, but he could be in his early twenties in 1901, marry Celia in the late 1920s or early 1930s, and be old and dying of cancer in 1954. Thus Warren was structurally forced to spread these events that all have their roots in the late 1920s—Jack's guitar mirroring Jimmie Rodgers', Jasper's birth two decades before the Korean War, and Jasper's death in the cave mirroring Floyd Collins—across five decades. The "retrospective atmosphere" that Justus describes is the working through of a particular Southern trauma, though not the Lost Cause and Old South trauma that I have

¹⁹ Warren also had a particular enmity toward the perception of his works as historical novels, mentioning in various interviews that his first three novels were not historical because they dealt with events that he had lived through. The contemporary setting for this novel may have developed from a similar impetus—to present an ultimately historical subject but not have the resulting work reductively viewed as historical fiction.

discussed with the earlier novels above. The trauma of *The Cave* is of the modernized, media-shaped New South with the 1920s as a particular moment of rupture. Warren's structure takes the traumatic rupture of the late 1920s and spreads it out across five decades to represent the traumatic working through of unclaimed identity.

In late January of 1925, Floyd Collins was trapped in Sand Cave, part of the same system as Mammoth Cave in central Kentucky, and he died fourteen days later after an extensive rescue attempt. Like Jasper Harrick, Collins was exploring the cave with eyes toward turning it into a tourist attraction. The rescue effort drew national media attention in the newspapers and also the relatively new medium of broadcast radio. The crush of reporters around the cave was so great that a 500-watt radio had to be installed at the cave, just to transmit raw stories from the site in to the town post office (Murray and Bruckner 154). While preparing to write *The Cave* in 1958, Warren visited the area with Brainard Cheney to interview locals that remembered the event and took notes on “theme and event, analyses of motivation, synopses of action, and [...] a large cast of characters” (Blotner 317). More contemporarily, Collins' fate inspired Andrew Jenkins, a songwriter and evangelist from Atlanta, Georgia, to pen a ballad called “The Death of Floyd Collins.” The ballad was recorded almost simultaneously by Fiddlin' John Carson and Vernon Dalhart. Dalhart's version was a surprise hit selling “306,000 copies—more than any other recording in Columbia's hill country catalogues of the 1920s” and setting the stage for the national fame of Jimmie Rodgers two years later (Tichi 191). Stoneback points to “The Death of Floyd Collins” as “surely the ur-text of *The Cave*” (18). Indeed there are many points of confluence between the ballad and Jasper Harrick's rescue attempt. The ballad refers to the weeping and regret of Collins' mother and father, specifically the image of this distress as captured by the balladeer. In the same way, the presence of Jack and Celia Harrick at the cave

and the man below is the man inside, of course, inside you. The submerged man in you and the man in the ground. Somewhere along the way this became the point” (Blotner 324). A similar respect for the working title is held by Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher, who write: “In this novel setting occupies the central position that is normally filled by the protagonist. Further, the working title of the novel, *The Man Below* [...] better suggests the centrality of spatiality, and recognizes the way cave images shape every aspect of the novel.” Their praise for the working title is admirable, but I would argue that the “central position” is not held by the setting, but by the myth of Jack Harrick, as Stoneback writes, “*The Cave*, then is a folk ballad, a hillbilly song, far more so than it is a Plato-derived allegory or anything else” (19). Warren’s folk ballad is the fading echo of Jack Harrick while John T. is the “man below” the myth.

William Bedford Clark’s reading of the text does emphasize the titular allusion, but the core of his argument is sound. He writes: “In *The Cave*, Warren reverses this symbol [of Plato’s cave], showing how ‘ideal’ images generated by Big Media, the incestuous realm of advertising, popular entertainment, and electronic communications, subvert the immediacy of the phenomenological world and serve to eviscerate human experience” (121). With *The Cave*, Warren is responding to the generated image of the South that came out of the 1920s media saturation. The germ of the novel, the story of Floyd Collins, is a prime example of the media shaping of Southern narratives that became possible with the advent of home radios in the mid-1920s. Speaking of the media frenzy as depicted in the novel, Bedford Clark writes, “It documents how communal solidarity is transformed into what Boorstin would call a ‘pseudo-event,’ packaged for popular consumption with an eye toward financial profit” (122). In the novel, the packaging of the legitimate communal event is largely enacted by Isaac Sumpter. Through his collusion with reporters, he draws the outside into Johntown, and the plight of

Jasper, along with the genuine support of the community, is subverted and shaped by this media influence. Monty's song, at first a personal response to his brother's absence, is broadcast and extracted from the community. This is also the course of the media portrayal of Floyd Collins' death. First it was a media "pseudo-event," then that event was chronicled by a balladeer from outside the community, finally that ballad gained popular success and came to reshape and redefine the tragedy beyond the borders of the South and the niche genre of hillbilly music. The unprecedented popularity of Jimmie Rodgers is the next step in this process whereby hillbilly music and narratives were transmitted throughout the nation, creating a pseudo-image that in turn came to define public perception of the South. Warren's response in *The Cave* is to this traumatic redefinition—the identity that is unclaimed because it is imposed, from the rest of the nation and from the community itself, in the era of mass media.

Warren dramatizes this incarnation of unclaimed identity with the myth of Jack Harrick, and the characters that are most directly affected by this myth are his sons, Jasper and Monty, his wife, Celia, and Jack himself. From the first scene, Monty Harrick's conflicted relationship to his father's myth is obvious. According to Justus, Monty has two problems: is he "a chip off the old block" and will the Bingham's accept a hillbilly dating their daughter? With his first problem, for Monty to be a "chip" is not defined by his biological relation to his father, but by his ability to live up to the myth Jack left behind: "For thirty years Old Jack had dragged jugs dry, whipped his box till folks fell down from dancing, cracked jaws with his fist like hickory nuts under a claw hammer, and torn off drawers like a high wind in October" (13). Compared to this myth, Monty feels inadequate: "Maybe his Big Brother was a chip off the old block, but he wasn't. He didn't know what he was. He was nothing" (14). Monty has the Harrick name and blood, he can sing and play guitar, but the myth of Jack Harrick is not defined by those things. It is defined by

being violent, virile, and larger than life. Monty sees both his father and brother as mythic giants, while he feels average, or less than it, by comparison. He remembers walking with Jasper, “so tall it looked like he had to duck for the stars [...] but Monty knew that he, Monty, wasn’t like Jasper, his big brother” (19). The myth is too much for Monty to live up to, and as I will discuss below it is too much for either Jasper or Jack himself, but Monty has the added pressure of Jo-Lea Bingham and her parents, who look down on hillbillies and everything that myth represents.

Monty is forced to navigate the space between these two contradictory, and seemingly unattainable, positions. The tension between the two is palpable as Monty and Jo-Lea discuss what she had heard from her father about Jasper and Isaac Sumpter’s plans to open a tourist attraction at the cave. Monty is incredulous and asks “What would Jasper do with money” (24). Monty is proud of the statement, because it is the sentiment of the upper class Bingham. Though he doesn’t know just how close it is: “Monty felt free and proud and high up” for having said it (24). Jo-Lea is pleased too because it is similar to what her father had said, “Yes, Daddy said, what’s money to a hill—” (24), but she pauses before saying hillbilly. Monty’s conflicted identities collide and he must maneuver between the two. Justus writes, “Monty’s maneuver is to seize upon the epithet *hillbilly* and force Jo-Lea to repeat it, as if an aggressive, willed iteration will somehow substantiate his reality and transform an epithet of alienation into one of acceptance and union” (277). He forces her to say it and admits “My pappy was a hillbilly [...] and my brother, he’s a pore cave-crawling hillbilly” (25). Like Jerry Calhoun and Sue Murdock from *At Heaven’s Gate*, Monty’s unclaimed identity consists of trying to integrate his identity against the definition forced upon him by class and events that occurred well before his birth. Stoneback writes of the novel itself, “simultaneously, [Warren] effects the deflation and the aggrandizement of the traditional [hillbilly] image while he explores its very nature as image”

(14). Monty makes a similar move here, forcing integration of that part of his identity through redefinition—putting the word into Jo-Lea’s mouth as a simultaneous rejection and affirmation.

Monty and Jo-Lea move to talking about Jasper’s songs when Monty picks up the guitar. Jo-Lea tells of an Orphic vision she experienced when she and a friend happened upon Jasper playing a song by the river. Monty plays a song Jasper wrote, and reveals that, unlike Jasper and his father, he does not display his musical ability. Jo-Lea says she didn’t know he played guitar at all, to which Monty replies “Every fool that can pick a box don’t have to go round showing off” (28). At this point, Jo-Lea notices that Monty is wearing the same boots that Jasper wore, though his “were bright and new, not with the casual confidence of long use, not a scar on them” (29). Like his boots, Monty has to develop his own comfort and identity, but in the moment he reacts with “a shock of guilt, and exposure” (29). Jo-Lea’s comforting and praise cannot soothe Monty’s guilt and he snaps, “Any hillbilly can pick a box” (29). Jo-Lea tries to help Monty. She says, “I’m not my daddy [...] don’t you see” (31), but Monty doesn’t see. It is a lesson that he can only learn through music.

The center of Monty’s quest for integrating the myth of Jack Harrick with his identity is also the musical center of the novel: the ballad that he writes about his brother. Like Andrew Jenkins with Floyd Collins, Monty elevates his brother’s plight in song. When he begins singing, it is quiet and secretive, with “muted chord[s]” and “singing so softly the words were almost indistinguishable, even close up” (210). The quiet shows that he is not singing for public acclaim—like his father did—but for the private, ordering power of song—as Jasper was when Jo-Lea saw him by the river. Monty’s quiet playing is also appropriate for the songwriting process, reserved in the early, exploratory phase. Jo-Lea is the first to realize the subject of Monty’s song: “‘It’s him,’ she cried out. ‘It’s him you’re singing about!’” (210). Monty stops

playing, but support from Jo-Lea and some of the others at the cave mouth convinces him to continue singing “louder now, but not quite loud” (211). The song inspires comments and reverence: “‘Singing about his Bubba,’ one of the men said, in the tone of a man in church” (211). In this moment Monty is beginning to process the myth of his father and to claim the parts of that myth that will make up his identity. Justus writes, “As he dignifies his brother in song, he simultaneously forges his own identity, an independent one that harmonizes both his separateness from and continuity with Jasper’s” (278). The guitar and the song become emblematic of this identification. One of the men says that Monty is playing the “self-same box” that belonged to Jasper, but Old Jim Duckett replies:

Naw, it is not his Bubba’s box. It is the box of Old Jack. It is the self-same box Old Jack used to tear the screaming guts out of. Way back yonder when he was helling and Hell-fahr gaped. Anybody who never heerd Jack Harrick in his day and time of strength rip off “Turkey in the Straw” and whoop and click his heels in the air twi’est ‘twixt verses, he ain’t heerd— (212)

Monty’s song, a plaintive yet hopeful ballad, stands in sharp contrast to his father’s “helling” ways and high energy picking. Yet the line of continuity is undeniable as he plays the “self-same” instrument. Tellingly, as if he feels his legacy threatened by Monty’s redefinition of what it means to be a singing and picking Harrick, Old Jack “commanded” Monty to stop, saying he is making his mother cry. But Celia says to “let him play,” symbolically addressing him not by the name of the hillbilly heller, but as “John T.”—the man, not the legend (212).

With his song, Monty is beginning to process the song-singing part of his father’s legacy, and in the scene he also explores the violence of that myth. Jebb Holloway makes a snide comment, suggesting that Monty is a coward for singing rather than hunting for Jasper in the

cave. Monty attacks Jebb, but “It was all so quiet and so fast, that it was over before most people there even knew anything was happening” (214). Just as his song is more reserved, Monty’s violence is not the hot hell-fire of his father’s—he defines his own self against the echoes of the myth—but he doesn’t need that violence because his song has its own communal power. After Jebb Holloway is forced to “apoly-gize,” Monty picks the guitar back up and plays loudly, singing a hopeful, triumphant verse that ends with the plea: “Oh, bring him out and let him in the sunshine stand!” (215). As the novel progresses, Monty’s song becomes a sort of local hymn for the community. Stoneback writes: “as his ballad, his song-story, performs its functions of community and communion at the caveside. Monty, in effect, reclaims the power of traditional country song, and old Jack acknowledges this when he sings Monty’s song at the end and wills his old box to his son” (19). The song itself performs the working through of unclaimed Harrick identity—moving across generations it allows both Monty and Jack to come to terms with their identity and life outside the legend.

The caveside ceremonies themselves are powerful moments in *The Cave*. Justus writes:

The ceremonies at the cave mouth are the intricate means by which the celebrants attain full humanity. They are the clearest illustration in all of Warren of one of the social implications of certain New Critical beliefs. “The object of a proper society,” says John Crowe Ransom, “is to instruct its members how to transform instinctive experience into aesthetic experience.” (275)

Monty’s song is a key part of this communal celebration of humanity, as are Brother Sumpter’s preaching and the hymns they sing, like “Rock of Ages.” William Bedford Clark notes that the ceremonies are also a clear expression of the media role in defining and rewriting Southern narrative identity. A key moment comes after the signing of “Rock of Ages,” what Stoneback

calls “the most skillful use of a hymn” in the novel (16). The words of the hymn, “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee” make Nick Pappy wonder “Who wanted to hide in a rock?” (266). Though he doesn’t understand the theological significance of the hymn, it does cause him to consider the plight of Celia Harrick, listening to the hymn under “the bright TV / lights shining on her yellow hair” (266). Nick thinks:

it was not nice and considerate of them to be singing that song to remind her of being stuck under a rock [...] That song Monty Harrick made up, it made more sense. It made more sense to ask God to bring Jasper Harrick out to the daylight bright and clear than to sing about that Rock of Ages. (266-7)

Later, in a similar moment of sympathy, Nick sees the false pomp and circumstance of the media as an affront to the dignity of the situation and fights the cameras away from Celia Harrick, shouting “Leave her alone!” and “I am going in. I will get him out. I will lift off that rock!” (328), in an attempt to end the charade. Bedford Clark notes that “Warren, in writing *The Cave*, is engaged in a similar action, and his book is at once a striking out against the media’s meretricious demeaning of the human condition and a determined effort to restore and record fully the human on its own terms” (123). Furthermore, the media definition of Jhontown is akin to communal definition of Jack Harrick through the myth of the hillbilly heller, thus the Harrick men can also be seen as “engaged in a similar action.” Bedford Clark also blames the media and outsiders for the Bacchanal collapse after Jasper’s death is announced: “in frenzied response to media hysteria, the gathering ends with a plunge into Dionysian oblivion” (122). It is not the internal response to the trauma that leads to chaos, but the actions of those who exploited it for drama, recreation, and profit.

At the center of the media exploitation of Johntown is Jasper Harrick, and at the center of his love for exploring caves is his father's myth. In some ways, the trauma of living up to the myth is what put Jasper in the ground in the first place. At various points throughout the novel, characters acknowledge that Jasper is a much more direct continuation of the Harrick myth than his brother Monty. Monty himself considers this in the first scene when he thinks that Jasper is a chip off the old block but wonders if he himself is. Jo-Lea often implies that she wishes her child was fathered by Jasper rather than Monty. Yet, this does not mean that Jasper was comfortable with his identity and inheritance. We do not hear from Jasper directly on the subject, but according to his mother, Celia, "That's why he crawled in the ground. To get away from everything" (298). When Celia asked him what lured him underground he answered: "It's not what you'd expect down there [...] It's not like what above-ground folks would expect [...] It's a nice temperature down there [...] It is not summer and it is not winter. There aren't any seasons to bother about down there" (239-40). For Jasper, the most important part of the underground world is not even that timelessness, but the isolation that allows him to escape from the expectations of his community. The rocks and caves have no knowledge of the Harrick myth, and so under that ground Jasper can escape the myth. Unlike Monty on the surface, Jasper doesn't have to do the work of integrating that traumatic past as long as he separates himself from the "above-ground folks" and their expectations, as he says to Celia: "Well, in the ground at least a fellow has a chance of knowing who he is" (241).

Jasper's retreat into the cave is a retreat from the unclaimed identity of his father's myth, and is mirrored by his immoral business partner, Isaac Sumpter, who also runs from the past. The unclaimed identity that Isaac retreats from is the history of his father, both as priest and as Jack Harrick's closest friend, and it is also biblical. Justus writes that Isaac "has an obsessive fear that

he was named Isaac to be sacrificed” (277). He accuses his father of this and experiences his father’s decision to not reveal Isaac’s lie (that he never actually made it all the way in to where Jasper was trapped in the cave) as an echo of that sacrifice. Isaac’s complex about his name also extends to his fear of being stereotyped as a Jew when he dates Goldie Goldstein, who refers to him as “Little Ikey.” Ironically, Isaac begins performing the role of the stereotypical Jew. When he looks into a mirror he explores his features and accepts the role: “He shrugged, dropped his hands, palms outward, in a parody of the classic gesture of the Jew’s resignation and irony, and repeated, in the accent of the stage Jew: ‘Ikey—Little Ikey’” (100). In running from the real history of his family and of his name, Isaac becomes a stereotypical exaggeration of the role imposed upon him. Justus writes, “In a chillingly appropriate way, Isaac’s search [for personal identity] is successful” (278). For both Isaac and Jasper, the impulse to run from integrating the unclaimed identity of the past leads to a tragic end, and they both serve as counter-image to the successful integration of Monty and, ultimately, old Jack himself.

Of course, the myth of Jack Harrick is most relevant to Jack Harrick himself. As I have already discussed, Jack represents various incarnations of the hillbilly/country music lore, but Stoneback also points out ties to John Henry, as *The Cave* is “the story of Jack, really *John* Harrick, JH, Warren’s salute to that other mythical JH—John Henry” (18). The John Henry of folklore died in a steel-driving contest with a machine—a tragic representation of the triumph of automation over a man with his hammer. Part of Jack’s myth is based around his blacksmith’s hammer, that can be heard ringing for miles, and guitar chords are also represented throughout the novel as ringing out like hammer blows. More importantly, this tie to John Henry also reflects the theme of New South impositions on individual identity. Henry’s futile contest was an attempt to maintain his identity as “a steel driving man” against the mechanization of the

modernizing railroad industry. Similarly, Jack Harrick's profession as a blacksmith would have been well outdated by the 1950's—it harkens back to an earlier vision of the South.

Jack's search for identity is played out across a life lived in this changing landscape, but it is also played in the context of a myth that the community imposed upon him. Late in the novel, on the verge of his epiphanic acceptance, he thinks, “who was Jack Harrick [...] nothing but a dream [...] dreamed up from the weakness of people. Since people were weak, they dreamed up a dream out of their need for violence, for strength, for freedom” (367-8). That dream is the myth of Jack Harrick, the hillbilly heller. The struggle for the man, Harrick, is discovering how to live outside of the myth—how to create an integrated identity combining what was lived and what was imposed. Celia Harrick seems, almost instinctively, to understand that the myth is tied more firmly to the name Jack than to the man himself, thus her insistence on calling her husband John T. is an attempt to subvert the myth and push the man to live outside of it. In their married life, Jack develops a private aversion to the name John T.—an anxiety that affirms how much of his self-image is tied up in his name and the myth it represents:

if a wrong name got called in the dark the danger was not in the fact that Jack Harrick didn't know the name of who was there in the dark with him. The danger was in the fact that Jack Harrick might not, in fact, know who Jack Harrick was, or if Jack Harrick had ever existed. (148)

This nominal anxiety is tied to an existential confusion, namely that in his youth Jack allowed himself to be defined by the dream others made of him. He internalized this dream and came to think of it as the entirety of his identity, but it was a false identity, driven by public perception, rather than the integrated identity of history *and* lived experience.

Jack's epiphany, and that integration, only comes after Jasper's death, with the help of Monty's song. Jack realizes that, in his marriage to Celia and nominal anxiety, "he had been caught in the vertigo of his own non-being" (387). A large part of Old Jack's concern in the latter part of the novel is the question of whether all men are like him. Having failed to identify himself beyond the myth, Jack wonders if he has any unique identity at all. He lacks an Other to define himself against, but he finds that Other in his own son Monty, and Monty's integration of the Harrick myth. He finds this realization as he thinks, "*Every man's got to make his own kind, his own kind of song [...] Oh, Monty, he's not like me. My son is not like me. All men are not like me*" and, "He felt better" (401). Immediately after this realization, he picks up his old guitar, begins to sing Monty's song, and, as Stoneback writes, transforms "Monty's song into his own epiphany" (20). That epiphany is the realization of his need for selfhood and integration.

Stoneback continues:

The people need a mythic singer, but that singer must ultimately accept that blessed identity with humility and live his life *outside* the myth, the song. Jack is finally freed from the weakness of living within the myth [...] when he reconciles his identity and knows he is earth-anchored in place, in family, in love, when he passes on his song and sings Monty's song, when he gives Monty his box. (23)

This integration takes a lifetime for Jack Harrick, as he relates to his wife: "I reckon living is just learning how to die. And [...] and dying [...] it's just learning how to live" (403). Dying in his wheelchair, Jack Harrick can finally come to terms with the myth that was forced upon him, and his identity beyond it, but I would not say that this is an absolute timeline. There is hope in *The Cave* for young Monty, who has already begun to process his unclaimed identity and to integrate

the myth, which he fully inherits along with the guitar in the final line of the novel: “‘I don’t want to bust the box,’ [Jack] said. ‘It’s Monty’s box’” (403).

7. *Flood: A Romance of Our Time* (1964)

With *Flood: A Romance of Our Time*, Warren again explores communal trauma, as he did in *The Cave*, but he also returns to a singular narrative consciousness. Like Jack Burden, Bradwell Tolliver is intelligent, acerbic, and able to think deeply about Warren's perennial spiritual and philosophical concerns. Like many of Warren's protagonists, Brad's unclaimed identity stems from his history and the past of the place he comes from—in his case the town of Fiddlersburg, Tennessee. Warren is again concerned with individual response to broad events and the legacy of the Southern past. In a 1969 interview with Richard Sale, Warren discusses the “germ[s]” of *Flood*. The first was driving past the home that served as Grant's headquarters during the Battle of Shiloh: “the village was the germ of Fiddlersburg and the house was the germ of the Fiddler house.” The second germ was Warren's acquaintance with “one or two flooded-out places in the TVA system in Tennessee” (Watkins 103). These historical germs tie the novel to two profound moments of trauma in Southern history: the Civil War and the electrification of the New South—moments that Warren's fiction deals with again and again. What is unique about *Flood* is that it is the most profoundly interested of Warren's novels to this point with the possibility of return. Bradwell Tolliver left Fiddlersburg in an attempt to find selfhood, but finds he cannot find selfhood without a return to his past—a return that is necessarily more mental than physical.

The opening passage of *Flood* is similar to the hypnotic prologue of *All the King's Men* in that it is a highly stylized entrance into the world of the novel. Here the focus is on the fairy tale simulation of Bradwell Tolliver's New South. Tolliver is returning to the land of his youth and the contrast between the years is symbolized by the contrast in the roadbed—as with Jack Burden driving over Willie Stark's slab highway, the narrator here says: “In those years [of

Tolliver's last passage on that road] the road had been blacktop. Now it was concrete. New concrete" (3). In Brad's absence the landscape has become a simulation, dominated by the fakery of The Seven Dwarfs Motel—a combination of fairytale kitsch and southern clichés. The motel has two billboards: one is an image of Prince Charming awakening a sleeping maiden, suggesting the romantic possibilities that are confirmed by the second billboard, with Prince Charming and the maiden in bed with the "Laz-ee Man's Delight Electric Massage Mattress" (5). However the most suggestive piece of signage is neither of these billboards, but the extra sign hanging below the first billboard. Unlike the other two signs that refer to the fairy tale theme of the motel, this sign refers to the "fairy tale" of its southern setting. It features "words ballooning from the bloated, minstrel-show-white lips of a benignly grinning black face" (4). The words proclaim the motel's amenities: "Breakfast Served In Cottage / Tennessee Smoked Ham and Red Gravy / Yassuh, Boss!" (4). The juxtaposition of these fairy tale and minstrel show clichés serves to emphasize the unreality of each. Just as we all know fairy tales to be an exaggerated and sanitized version of the medieval past, the motel reveals that nostalgic race dynamic to be another sanitized fiction.

This theme is exemplified by Bradwell's interactions with the character called Jingle Bells. When Tolliver first encounters Jingle Bells he is described as: "A mulatto—no dwarf, but in the attire of nursery fantasy: brown jerkin serrated at the bottom, with little bells on the points, and tights with the right leg red and the left yellow" (5). Tolliver sees the costume as an affront to Jingle Bells' dignity, but he responds: "there was a time when I had to wear me some cover-hauls said *Gulf* on the back. 'Nother time they said *Sam's Service*. I don't feel no diff-urrt now, boss" (6). Jingle Bells' uniform represents a satiric exaggeration of the denial of dignity to poor black (and white) workers. The fairy tale uniform essentially functions as *reductio ad absurdum*

to expose a truth that Bradwell had not previously understood. Ironically this truth is exposed through multiple levels of artifice. Jingle Bells is not the simple-minded minstrel stereotype that he first appears to be. It's not clear whether he ever wore those "cover-hauls" that he talks about. His persona is an act, which Tolliver begins to see in this first scene, but which is not fully revealed until the end of the novel. The first hint that Jingle Bells does not fit the stereotype is when Brad expects him to grin, "servile but sly," and receives no grin, only the response about "cover-hauls" (5). Jingle Bells completes his act, in that first scene, by taking Tolliver's exorbitant, guilt-driven tip and responding in a voice "where it couldn't possibly belong, not in Tennessee, not in that mush-mouth—a sharp, hard voice that, deliberately, gratingly, said 'Thank, Mac'" (10). After Tolliver leaves, in a state of confused, shamed disbelief, we learn that Jingle Bells is actually a college student named Mortimer Sparlin that came to Nashville from Chicago and works at the motel on weekends. He fakes the accent and the character to get better tips by "saying what they wanted to hear" (11). In fact, he assumes that that Bradwell Tolliver, the son of Fiddlersburg, Tennessee, is another northerner having his own "fun" faking the Southern accent. He wonders: "Who did Mac think he was kidding, try to God-damned Confederate?" (10). This opening scene with Jingle Bells sets up the conflict that Bradwell Tolliver will face throughout the novel—the center of his trauma and unclaimed identity—which is the integration of his past, of history, and of his definition against Others, differentiated along racial and class divisions, that he has thus far attempted to force through artifice but must learn to approach through acceptance.

James Justus sees this opening interaction as establishing, "a dominant image of fakery, ersatz identities, and the use of stage properties for carrying the burden of the self" (285). This fakery is exposed and threatened as Brad approaches the Seven Dwarfs motel, and sees that in

the midst of the fairy tale artificiality is a real stream: “Bradwell Tolliver wished that the water did not look real. What worried you was to find something real in the middle of all the faking. It worried you, because if everything is fake then nothing matters” (4). Tolliver ran from Tennessee to New York and then to the Spanish Civil War, seeking authenticity, but after his return he found himself ineffectual as a writer and disillusioned. He considered returning to die an authentic death for the cause, but instead retreated, after a brief but tumultuous period in Fiddlersburg, to the land of absolute fakery: Hollywood. It is somewhat comforting to Brad, as much as he is on one level disgusted by the motel, to find the highway outside of his hometown submerged in anonymous inauthenticity. It allows him to continue to drift in that state, but the existence of a real stream reminds Brad that, under all the fakery, there is a truth. Leonard Casper writes, “if everything *seems* false because truth (like goodness, as Willie Stark sees it) is in perpetual process, then *everything* matters. The more cryptic the world, the more synoptic the eye must be” (42). Brad is just beginning to realize that his task in Fiddlersburg will require him to develop that “synoptic” vision, gathering the fragments of his past to process his unclaimed identity and develop an integrated identity, or, as Justus writes:

His compulsive reliving of anguished moments shows that though he is afflicted by a corrupted conscience, nothing from that past has been lost; and his task is to show himself what is left, what demonstrations of error, what fragments of truth, can be retrieved to shape a coherent and morally meaningful life. (287)

Brad comes to Fiddlersburg to write a movie script, not to relive moments of trauma and yet he is forced to, because those moments represent a part of his identity that has gone unclaimed for many years and returning to the town makes their recursion inevitable.

Fiddlersburg is the site of multiple moments of trauma in Bradwell Tolliver's life. Chronologically these began in his childhood as he came to understand the circumstances of his life. Brad's father had married into money but never quite fit the profile. He came "boiling out of the swamp" to marry Calistha Cottshill and took over her money in the process. He later acquired the Fiddler house and there he raised his two children there, after Calistha died giving birth to Maggie. Tolliver was not a model father. He was uncouth, abusive, alcoholic, and prone to disappearing into the swamp for days at a time. For a long time, Brad did not know what his father did when he ran to the swamps, though he presumed moonshine had something to do with it. He learned the truth from Frog-Eye, Brad's own swamp-rat friend, who took him to "the spot where Lancaster Tolliver lay in the mud of the deep swamp, unconscious, with the marks of tears yet on his cheeks" (176). This sight is traumatic for young Brad, who found he "could not bear the knowledge that his father, in his brutality, could lay in the mud and weep" (176). Yet he also realized that this knowledge gave him some power over his father. Young Brad demanded to be sent to school in Nashville on the money his mother left, for that purpose, in her will. His father raised a hand as if to strike him, but Brad stopped him with a revelation: "I have seen you crying," he said to his father (177). Soon after this event, when Lancaster saw that his cause was lost, he fled to the swamp, where he was found dead two days later. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, after his return to Fiddlersburg Brad finds himself repeating the pattern of his father. Justus writes, "His recourse from such pressures [of the past and his present obligation to Yasha Jones] is to recapitulate that regressive gesture which earlier defined his father: flight back to the swamp, a return to the innocence of pure creaturehood" (287). He again enters the swamp with the assistance of Frog-Eye. These moments of retreat are similar to Jack Burden's brass-bound

idealism in that they are a coping mechanism that delay Tolliver's necessary working through of his unclaimed identity.

Another key moment of trauma for Brad came out of his friendship with Israel Goldfarb. Goldfarb was an old Jewish man who lived in Fiddlersburg, but was in many ways always an outsider. He spent most of his time alone, with his books in various languages, and for the most part seemed happy with this. He taught Brad, among other things, how to play chess. Tolliver felt that he was never able to repay Izzie Goldfarb for his kindness, and this guilt led him to write the story that would form the core of his first book and launch his literary career. *I'm Telling You Now*, was a way for Tolliver to bid farewell to Fiddlersburg and, most importantly, to Goldfarb. In the eponymous story he writes, "All I know is that when the time came for me to go away from that town [...] I did not tell you goodbye. But I am telling you now" (230). Randolph Runyon notes, "'I'm Telling You Now,' with its self-referential title, is precisely what it says it is, the text that must take the place of the goodbye not spoken in time" (193). This unspoken goodbye is, perhaps more so than the disintegration of his and his sister's marriages, the core traumatic moment for Brad in leaving Tennessee. He attempted to process this material with the story, but never felt that it was enough—because it had the stain of intentionality assuring its falsehood. In his return to Fiddlersburg he is again attempting to force the recursion of that trauma, but his attempts again prove false. It is only after his control is wrested away by Calvin's bullet that Brad is able to realize that he doesn't need to dig up Izzie Goldfarb, and with that realization he finds the means to organically process his trauma and unwrite the textual simulation of "I'm Telling You Now."

One of the most conventionally traumatic moments in the novel occurs during the period when Brad was living in Fiddlersburg with his wife Lettice in 1940, 20 years prior to the novel's

present day. This is the quasi-rape scene—though she would later admit to having consented—when the young engineer, Al Tuttle, and Maggie Tolliver adulterously couple to the scratched-record repeating sound of “The Continental.” Brad is more than complicit in his sister’s violation, because it was he, in his drunkenness, who put on “that God-damned record” (319), and left Tuttle to dance with Maggie as he dragged Lettice upstairs for his own sexual act (of questionable consent)—an act that would lead to the conception of a child and a miscarriage during the stress of Calvin’s trial. That we later find out that Maggie consented to intercourse with Tuttle does nothing to lessen the trauma of that night or its result: Calvin murdering Tuttle. When Maggie tells Lettice of the terrible decentering and shattering of self that she experienced as a result of her alleged rape, Lettice offers a clear, succinct expression of what it means to develop identity and selfhood through the integration of traumatic material. She says: “you have to make your *you* out of all that sliding and brokenness of things” (325). It would take two decades and a return to Fiddlersburg for Bradwell Tolliver to make his “*you*” out of the varied traumas he suffered there.

After the trial, Brad leaves for Hollywood—his marriage to Lettice ruined, Calvin Fiddler is sentenced to the nearby penitentiary, and Maggie Tolliver stays in the home she and Brad grew up in and becomes caretaker for Cal’s aging mother. Interestingly, James Justus notes a structural connection between Izzie Goldfarb and Cal Fiddler, locked up in the penitentiary, as they share a common, solitary bond. Tolliver says of Goldfarb that he was alone but never lonesome, and Justus expands this characterization to Fiddler as well, after his “reclamation” (290). Yet this exalted state, which represents a comfortable selfhood that Tolliver lacks, is in contrast with his own inner state, the town of Fiddlersburg, and the “whole South,” as Brad says:

Hell, the South is the country where a man gets drunk just so he can feel even lonesome and then comes to town and picks a fight for companionship. The confederate States were founded on lonesomeness. They were all so lonesome that they built a pen around themselves so they could be lonesome together. (165)

From this state of regional lonesomeness, Justus extracts a larger significance. He writes, “If a village, even a region, suffers from some common limitation, it should be clear to a man of Tolliver’s gifts that the single-minded concern for one’s own dilemma is finally self-defeating” (291). In other words, this condition is a call for Warren’s recognitions and for the death of the self. It is only through radical acceptance, love, and community that one can develop selfhood, even if they must remain alone or cut off from that community. They can be alone, but never lonesome.

Bradwell Tolliver returns to Fiddlersburg with Yasha Jones to work on the script for a film that Yasha planned to direct based on the planned flooding of the town. Tolliver, fascinated from his first sight of it, plans in an early conception of the film to focus its final image on the Seven Dwarfs Motel. He tells Yasha: “I can see it now. As Fiddlersburg, with its wealth of Southern tradition, unassuming charm, homely virtue, and pellagra, sinks forevermore beneath the wave, the Seven Dwarfs Motel will rise in spray, glimmering like a dream” (38). The allegorical significance of his dream is clear, if a bit heavy handed: the conventional image of Fiddlersburg as a fading Old South town—complete with its weathered storefronts, Confederate monument, and You’ll Never Regret It Café—is erased and replaced with a more obvious, but no less fabricated, fantasy. Still, for Brad there is something comforting in the idea that an image tied into the past could be replaced by another image grounded in pure fantasy. If the image of his hometown could be so easily erased and replaced, then his own trauma might be erased as

well. Furthermore, William Bedford Clark notes that Bradwell Tolliver and Yasha Jones are, as Hollywood fabricators, thoroughly complicit with the “fairy-tale self-deceptions” that are represented by the Seven Dwarfs Motel. More importantly he notes that “Fiddlersburg has never been an idyllic place [...] and to look back upon it with a naïve longing is merely to surrender to the same demand for illusion to which the Hollywood and television image-makers pander” (123). Warren himself echoes this sentiment his interview with Richard Sale, in which he states: “there would be something artificial in doing it [returning home, i.e. to Fiddlersburg] by an act of will. It would be an attempt to reenact sentimentally a piece of the past, which I think is always false” (Watkins 103). And yet Justus notes that “What substantially counters Tolliver’s ironic fantasy is the reality of the perdurable prison, not glimmering dreamlike in spray, but clinging stubbornly, defying extravagant hopes that the flood can be all-redeeming without its office” (294). What is needed is not simply erasing the past, but redeeming and reforming it. It is worth noting that the example of Cal Fiddler, who is able to practice medicine and experiment in his laboratory while incarcerated, shows that this is a penitentiary that believes in reformation, not strictly punishment. It is through that process of reform that all of Fiddlersburg’s inhabitants, and perhaps Bradwell Tolliver especially so, can come to terms with the past and prepare for rebirth in the new town that will replace the flooded one.

That process of reform for Brad, or I should say his processing of unclaimed identity, is driven by his experience in the community. He owes his inner growth to the communal growth of the town at large. Though the narrative is organized around a singular consciousness, the epiphanies are spread across many characters. In that way it can be read as a continuation of the narrative decentering in *The Cave*, though a similar non-confinement of epiphanies can also be

seen in the ensembles of *Night Rider* and *At Heaven's Gate*. For Brad, his own growth is inspired by the examples of multiple characters, most notably Brother Potts and Calvin Fiddler.

Brother Potts is a one-armed priest affected by a highly symbolic affliction. He is dying of cancer, and wants nothing more than to live long enough to preach the farewell service for his town. The “race” between the flood and his disease is a constant, though quiet, matter of speculation in the town. Another matter of speculation is a death row prisoner known as Pretty-Boy. Brother Pinkney, the Harvard educated black priest, had been attempting to pray with the prisoner, who was also black, for some time but Pretty-Boy has refused to pray. Townspeople have begun treating it as a “game” and betting on when the prisoner will “crack.” This behavior bothers well-meaning Brother Potts and he attributes their vice to the flooding of the town: “It looks like something gets into folks, good folks. It looks like all this waiting to be flooded out is doing something to good people. They are turned inside out. For instance, some of ‘em talk like they would like to get their hands on that boy and make him crack” (236). Brother Potts is bothered by this flippancy, and decides that he will get Brother Pinkney’s permission to pray with Pretty-Boy. Brother Pinkney is not willing to give his blessing, possibly because he questions Brother Potts motives—throughout this scene Brother Potts struggles to appear unbiased, but there are multiple instances of unconscious, semi-conscious, or explicit racism on his part. There is some genuine concern in Brother Potts’ action, whether that concern is for Pretty-Boy or for his white parishioners is not clear. Nonetheless, he goes to the prison and attempts to pray with Pretty-Boy, who responds by spitting in the pastor’s face. In spite of his outrage, Brother Potts keeps praying out loud “for God to make me know that what happened was right because it was His Holy Will” (239). He is speaking of more than just the spitting as being God’s Holy Will—his disease and the flooding of the town are clear referents. Brother

Potts leaves the jail without wiping the spit from his face and that night he composed the germ of a hymn about the flooding of the town:

When I see the town I love
 Sinking down beneath the wave
 I pray I'll remember then
 All the blessings that God gave.

When I see the life I led
 Whelmed and sunk beneath the flood,
 Let the waters drown regret and envy—
 Make me see my life was good

God, make me know what I didn't have
 Was the sweetest gift You gave.
 Oh, let me know such perfect joy,
 When what I did have goes 'neath the wave. (239)

The epiphany that Brother Potts takes from his encounter with Pretty-Boy is a lesson of profound acceptance—acceptance of the have and the have not, the good and the bad, the giveth and the taketh away.

The next character to have a similar epiphany—and influence Brad though it—is Calvin Fiddler. The first time Brad and Yasha go to the penitentiary, the warden tells them that Cal does not practice medicine behind bars, even though they would be happy to have him do so, because “he has lost his confidence. He says he is afraid of doctoren now” (156). This fear comes from the moment that he shot Al Tuttle, and its erasure is part of his epiphany. When Brad visits the penitentiary late in the novel, after he recovers from Cal shooting him, Calvin says that he had been unable to practice medicine in prison because every time he tried to help someone he could not visualize the pages of the medical textbook, but “as soon as that gun went off, it was different. I stood there and [...] I saw a page in the book” (410). With that page Cal was able to save Brad's life, but more importantly with that gunshot he came to realize something about his life. The epiphanic moment for Cal Fiddler comes when he experiences the traumatic recursion

of Tuttle's murder. Leonard Casper writes: "Cal, by shooting Brad as, previously, he shot alleged rapist Tittle, knows that insecure self-esteem, rather than protective affection for his wife, has been his moving passion. The trauma of facing the truth—his hate—at the heart of his moments sets him free" (42). What Cal realizes is ultimately similar to what Brother Potts realized—to put aside pure selfish interest and accept. To place this lesson into the language Warren uses elsewhere, this is the recognition of the death of the self that leads to selfhood. The combination of these two epiphanies as related to Brad helps leads him to an epiphany of his own. Leonard Casper notes an important structural effect of this:

Were this a much earlier Warren novel, the meaning of Brother Potts and Calvin would have been secreted in exempla such as the Statement of Ashby Wyndham or the manuscript of Cass Mastern. But in the mature Warren, his long-held view that salvation is a common enterprise is better satisfied by a larger sharing of whatever the logic of experience, and the reasons of the heart, discloses. (44)

In that sense, *Flood* continues the experimentation Warren began in *The Cave*. Whereas in *The Cave* he experimented by dividing the narrative consciousness across a cast of characters, he still utilized the same structural enclosure of what Casper calls an "exempla" with the Statement of Ashby Wyndham. In the intervening novel, *Wilderness* (1961), he experimented with removing the surrounding narrative, as that novel has been described as being nothing but exempla. Now, with *Flood* he removes the exempla from that structural encapsulation and injects it into characters within the main narrative.

The epiphany that Brad eventually has is closely tied to his history in Fiddlersburg and to Israel Goldfarb. Early in the novel, Brad thinks of the fate of Goldfarb's grave once the flood waters roll in. He thinks: "Would that be another death, a drowning, an eternal drowning, a

perpetual suffocation, a crushing weight on the chest that would never go away? Bradwell Tolliver, with a sudden swelling of the heart, thought that he himself, by God, if nobody else did, would take care of Izzie Goldfarb” (18). He places himself in position to be a hero for his departed mentor, but as Justus writes:

Tolliver wants to use him [Goldfarb] egotistically; to find the grave and relocate the body in the new town would be to find and relocate himself without the stain of a past which he is unable to reassemble in any coherent way. But the price of resurrection is death—coming to terms with that past, acknowledging responsibility for its shame as eagerly as taking credit for its glory—which is to say the death of the old self, after which reclamation is possible. (290)

This egotistical use is essentially a continuation of the goodbye Brad wrote into *I'm Telling You Now*. It shows that despite appearances and fakery he has not learned the lessons he himself was teaching—that respect for the past is not obtained through self-interested performance, but through acceptance, as Brother Potts and Cal Fiddler found.

This is not to say that Warren discounts the possibility of artistic influence on the production of selfhood. Within the novel, the clearest expression of this possibility comes with the appearance of, and allusion to, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. H.R. Stoneback writes, “Warren plays symphonic variations on images and themes from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, including a pattern of sometimes faint, sometimes obvious echoes of Hemingway's epigraph from John Donne. An intricate pattern of island and continent imagery [...] provides the deep structure of Warren's novel. And there are *bells* everywhere” (“For Whom” 15). Indeed, Stoneback goes on to argue that Tolliver's reading of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is “the core image of Warren's novel” (16). What then is the effect of this reading at the

core of the novel? In the short term it leads to the drunken party that spurred the murder of Tuttle, Lettice's miscarriage, and the disintegration of both Brad and his sister's marriages. Stoneback attributes this outbreak of violence to what Warren elsewhere called the "passionate emptiness and tidal lust" of the modern condition—a condition Brad knew as a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and which he reencountered in the story of Hemingway's Robert Jordan (17). Another short term effect of Hemingway's novel is that Brad has to interpret and counter the misdirected praise of it by his editor, Telford Lott, who sent him an advance copy and said it was a "masterwork" that would "create an international sensation" and was the novel "Bradwell Tolliver might have written" (306). Stoneback notes that this reading cheapens the text: "Telford Lott renders epiphanies of the human spirit into cocktail chatter and measures vision in terms of commercial success" (18). This limited conception of spiritual understanding as merely an ostentatious display is directly contradicted by Hemingway's Jordan, who tells himself he was "learning fast there at the end" (467). The emphasis is on the inner, spiritual learning; Jordan won't live to perform his epiphany, and yet he does not need to for it to have meaning. The lessons Robert Jordan learns are not about performance or perfection but, as Stoneback writes, that we "live long messy confused lives that somehow tend inexorably toward the same knowledge, the same mystery" (19). After the confusion of those short term effects from his reading of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Brad lives through two decades and comes back to Fiddlersburg where he finally learns how to not perform but to *be*, as Robert Jordan says, "completely integrated" (471). For both men the language of this epiphanic wholeness, and selfhood, is rendered in terms of the heart: dying, Robert Jordan feels "his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (471), and, living in his dying town, Bradwell Tolliver realizes, "*There is no country but the heart*" (440).

Toward the end of the novel, Brad receives a telegram from Mort Seebaum, the director who took up the Fiddlersburg movie project after Yasha Jones resigned, asking him to write the script. Tolliver shows that he has finally realized the integration of the past is something lived, not forced through the conscious effort of the artist: “He grasped the telegram in both hands and tore it across. He carefully laid the yellow halves one on top of the other, and tore again. He let the pieces flutter away from him, to the grass” (439). This is followed by the realization that he doesn’t need to look for Izzie Goldfarb’s grave. Tellingly, this realization comes during Brother Potts farewell service, while the crowd sings the hymn he wrote for the town. In that moment, Brad thinks back to the past, to all the trauma and unclaimed identity that was left in that soon to be flooded and:

in his inwardness, he said: *I cannot find the connection between what I was and what I am. I have not found the human necessity.*

He knew that that was what he must try to find.

But he knew that now, at this moment, he did not need to try to find the grave of Israel Goldfarb. And he knew that Old Goldfarb would not have him try to find it. (439)

Brad finally realizes that such a performance is impotent because the “human necessity” is only to be found in acceptance of “all the nameless ones who had lived in this place and done good and done evil” (439). Justus writes, “Tolliver comes finally to realize what Goldfarb always knew: that history is necessarily an unclear mixture of good and evil because human beings are constituted of both [...] The historical Fiddlersburg is not boundaried in geographical space: ‘*There is no country but the heart*’” (289). Not only does he not *need* to find the grave, but he realizes that to do so would be a disingenuous performance of deference to the past and respect

for Goldfarb, but the work of synthesizing unclaimed identity must be an internal process of realization. The act of moving the grave would simply be a continuation of the Hollywood fakery and performance that has defined his, largely unfulfilling, life until this point. In this epiphanic moment, Bradwell Tolliver moves from a path of performance and stasis to understanding and growth—a path laid out by Warren in *Brother to Dragons*:

The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.

The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.

The recognition of direction of fulfillment is the death of the self,

And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.

All else is surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit.

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